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Poetics of Resistance: object, word and image in the literatures and visual arts of Iraq and Palestine

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Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD


2015

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Abstract

The relationships between ‘states’ are no longer based on notions of national sovereignty, but rather on interconnected networks of continuous and porous circulations. The visual arts and literatures of the new globalising world must now be understood in light of this new reality. They breach by now out-dated models informing our understandings of word, image and object, and transgress the boundaries of established literary and artistic traditions. The visual artists and writers studied are today creatively fashioning a new vision for their respective societies. Through positive engagement and active resistance, their practices and artistic products embody new relationships with the new global order of power and cultural politics. Resisting both the projected new global order and the old national priorities, their works represent new aesthetics that bring their works into the twenty-first century.

This thesis examines comparatively the literary writings and works of visual art from the two decades at the turn of the twenty-first century by carefully chosen Iraqis and Palestinians and locates their new aesthetics in their response and resistance to globalisation. It focuses, through their engagement with ‘attendant memory games’, on the intricate ways these writers and visual artists challenge various political and cultural power structures, old and new, without necessarily abandoning their commitments. Material objects, word and image serve as potent sites where new memories may be developed and legacies alternative norms formulated and circulated.

Despite the continuous displacement and relocation of traditional aesthetic and epistemological paradigms by these contemporary creative figures, ‘memory’ – a combination of collective and individual – is a site of rivalry between those who want to hold on to old power structures, and those seeking new ways of strengthening social solidarity through inclusion and pluralism.

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A note on translation and transliteration

I have used published translations of Arabic and Turkish texts, referring to the original texts when the published translation does not satisfy the need of specific points. The appendix provides the full Ibn Zaydun poem in Arabic with Sieglinde Lug's translation.

Arabic texts appearing in the main body of this thesis have been transliterated without diacritical marks. However, I have preserved the 'ayn and hamza in all cases as set out by the *International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES)*.

Names of authors and books are translated and/or transliterated according to their English publication details (e.g. Khedairi rather than al-Khudayri), or according to *IJMES* where no translation is available, without diacritics. Where a name has a standard form in English or is included in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, these forms have been used. Authors and texts which are not my primary texts are neither transliterated nor translated, unless necessary.

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I regret that while writing this thesis, Rafa al-Nasiri left this world. He has left us with works of such great beauty which will continue to fight against all forms of violence we are being faced with in our contemporary age. To Steve Sabella, Mina al-Druby, the British Museum and Charles Pocock at Meem Gallery: thank you for providing me with beautiful reproductions of the inspiring works discussed here.

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Introduction

The rules of resistance and memory games

Objects, words and images in literature, photography and painting have become sites of contestation with real or imagined past narratives at the turn of the 21st century. They represent contemporary forms of struggle with power structures at play in society, government and the market place. These objects, words and images do not simply remain ‘storehouses of memory’¹, but it should be noted that they are also the result of for the artists’ (both literary and visual) struggle between authority and subversion. As such they oppose the use of ‘historical memory [as] an important tool for political elites to enhance their legitimacy and control’². Instead they negotiate new histories through objects, and enhance discussions in fictional and museum narratives, where these objects are discussed. Through words and images, charged with historical resonance in poetry, photography and painting, the artists and writers turn objects, words and images into sources of further ‘dissensus’ in the literatures and visual arts of Iraq and Palestine at the turn of twentieth century. By turning discordant memories and simple sign-signified-signifier constructions into potent sites of resistance they make their mark on the art at the turn of the century.

Thesis scope

¹ ‘Regimes of Memory: An Introduction’, in *Memory Cultures: Memory, Subjectivity and Recognition*, ed. by Susannah Radstone and Katharine Hodgkin (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publication, 2006), p. 19.

² Eric Davis, ‘Introduction’, in *Memories of State: Politics, History and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq* (California: University of California Press, 2005), p. 1. Davis treats mixed creative responses to Ba‘thist appropriation of historical memory in the cultural productions of Iraq in ‘Memories of State and the Arts of Resistance’, in *Memories of State*, pp. 200-226.

Within the theoretical context sketched above, in the chapters that proceed, I analyse the following works: the novel *Absent* (2004) by Betool Khedairi (b. 1965); Mahmoud Darwish's (1941-2008)³ poetry, including *The Stranger's Bed* (1998), *A State of Siege* (2002) and *Don't Apologise For What You Have Done* (2003); Steve Sabella's (b. 1975) two photographic series 'Search' (1997) and 'Identity' (2002) and his photographic installation 'Settlement: Six Israelis and One Palestinian' (2008 – 2010); and Rafa al-Nasiri's (1940 - 2013) 'Homage to Ibn Zaydun' (2010).

These works all demonstrate a) responses to forces of globalisation, which paradoxically continue to buttress the authority of the nation-states the artists reflect on, even as it relegates them to contact points within a global network for the circulation of ideas, and b) challenges to the inherent dominant discourses and practices of i) patriarchy and ii) literary and artistic traditions. These artists and writers demand their individuality in the 'space of places',⁴ and call for 'planetary'⁵ ways of understanding humanity, based on nuanced differences and individuality within a collectivity. In other words, although these artists and writers are aware of constructed cohesive collectivities, they aim to give a personal voice to those without power to represent themselves in the locale of flows.

Iraq and Palestine: colonial legacies, nationalisms and global encounters

The reason for choosing visual arts and literatures of Iraq and Palestine is that these countries have many shared experiences: their independence from the British

³ The sources cited in the footnotes below show discrepancies in documentations of Darwish's year of birth. Atef al-Shaer brought my attention to Pierre Joris' photograph of Darwish's tombstone on which it is inscribed the year 1941. See Pierre Joris, 'A Visit to Mahmoud Darwish's Grave', *Nomadics*, 22 February 2015 <<http://www.pierrejoris.com/blog/?p=12905>> [accessed 22 July 2016].

⁴ Zygmunt Bauman, 'Glocalization and hybridity', *Glocalism: Journal of culture, politics and innovation*, 1 (2013), p. 1. I will discuss this concept further below.

⁵ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Planetary', in *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), p. 72. This is to be elaborated upon below.

Mandate periods which spanned 1921 – 1932 for Iraq and 1920 – 1948 for Palestine and were followed by several changes to bring political, economic and social stability to its peoples. Referring to this shared British colonial legacy, Ghada H. Talhami has discussed in great depth additional links between the two geographies, namely: the shared antagonistic stance towards Israel; their shared commitment to Arab nationalism; their expulsion from Kuwait following the First Gulf War (1990); and the common experiences of Iraqi Jewish and Palestinian refugees.⁶

However marked differences exist between these two countries' historical experiences in the twentieth and twenty-first century: Iraq gained de facto independence in 1958, when the Hashemite monarchy there came to an end. Yet, in Palestine, the Arab population went from British rule to Israeli occupation (1948 -), meaning that the struggle for political autonomy in Palestine is still ongoing.

At the turn of the twenty first century, global markets and external influence of international bodies such as the UN threaten the livelihood of the Iraqi and Palestinian peoples in different ways. They, the Palestinian Authority (PA) and Iraq, since the invasion of Iraq in 2003 especially, have been forced into a state of global financial dependency.

For example, in December 2005, in exchange for \$685 million from the IMF, the Iraqi government accepted IMF loan conditionalities. These included raising subsidised oil fuel prices and scrapping the food rations program.⁷ The IMF loan

⁶ Ghada H Talhami, 'Shared Destinies: Iraq and Palestine', *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies*, 2. 2 (2008), pp. 195-208.

⁷ Daud Salman, 'Cut in Food Rations Hurting Poor Iraqis', *Globalpolicy.org*, 2006 <<https://www.globalpolicy.org/component/content/article/167-attack/35590.html>> [accessed 3 June 2016]; Robert Looney, 'The IMF's Return to Iraq', *Challenge*, 49.3 (May – June 2006), pp. 26-27; Erin Herring and Glen Rangwala, 'Iraq, Imperialism and Global Governance', *Third World Quarterly*, 26. 4-5 (2005), p. 679. Professor Jane Harrigan has discussed the relationship between food security, global financial markets and politics in the MENA region. For more on this, please see Professor Jane Harrigan, 'Prof. Jane Harrigan's Inaugral Lecture: Did Food Prices Plant the Seeds of the Arab Spring?', *YouTube*, 2011, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fkbS5EZlbU&feature=youtu.be>>

conditionalities ‘do not only undermine the national sovereignty of the recipient country, but also undermine its economic resources and development priorities.’⁸ This exemplifies how governments and societies have had to adapt to a new global order of market power, regardless of the wishes of the nation, in exchange for a free market economy.

Looking at the historical and political constellation of Iraq and Palestine at the turn of the twenty-first century, it becomes apparent that global financial hegemonies have a significant influence on their social, economic and political affairs. Critics may argue that such global flows of capital have taken over other systems and networks of circulation. One argument in this vein is as follows:

In [the] process of celebration and adaptation [to globalisation] states and their people, fully immersed in the corporate capitalist society, have accepted the profit motive of corporate capitalism as their political value system to the exclusion of the values of welfare and social justice that were espoused by pre-globalised social democracies. [...] The “lifeworld” is diminished by systems – market-driven areas of life wherein the operative rationality is money and power. This corporate-capitalism-induced, market-driven globalization has successfully insinuated a globalist epistemology consisting of a one-dimensional definition of Western civilization and values without reference to any social or cultural pluralism.⁹

With roots in the Peace of Westphalia (1648) which founded the principles of the sovereignty of nation-states, determining that each sovereign power was to have full

[accessed 4 June 2016]. See also Jane Harrigan, *The Political Economy of Arab Food Sovereignty* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) and Jane Harrigan, *Aid and Power in the Arab World: IMG and World Bank Policy-Based Lending in the Middle East and North Africa* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

⁸ Sahar Taghdisi-Rad, *The Political Economy of Aid in Palestine: Relief from conflict or development delayed?* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 21.

⁹ Upendra D. Acharya, ‘Globalization and Hegemony Shift: Are States Merely Agents of Corporate Capitalism?’, *Boston College Law Review*, 54. 3 (2013), pp. 938-939.

control over its territory,¹⁰ globalisation here is seen as a post Cold-War construct of reformed networks of influence and trade in opposition to state sovereignty. Accordingly corporate-capitalism is seen as the life force behind today's globalised relations, implying a singular episteme without 'reference to social or cultural pluralism'.

Whilst it is true that governments are increasingly favouring policies enabling participation in the free market economy exemplified above in relation to post-Oslo Palestine and Iraq in 2004, to the detriment of values of social welfare and justice, Acharya's account does not take into consideration two important factors: a) moments when governments respond to pressures from society to resist economic liberalisation, and b) the agency of alternative networks connecting people based on differences rather than similarities.¹¹

This latter notion is put forth by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her essay 'Planetarity'. Rooted in a reading of literary studies and comparative literature, Spivak calls for more acts of border crossing than were previously allowed for

¹⁰ Barry Hindess, 'Sovereignty as Indirect Rule', in *Re-envisioning Sovereignty: The End of Westphalia?*, ed. by Trudy Jacobsen, Charles Sampford and Ramesh Thakur (Aldershot, Hants, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 302 – 307.

¹¹ This debate between state sovereignty and the power of the market is really one which lies in international political economy. On the one hand, liberalists would argue that the state and market-induced capital are autonomous entities. In Philip G. Cerny, 'Paradoxes of the Competition State: The Dynamics of Political Globalization', *Government and Opposition*, 32 (1997), pp. 251–274, he argues that state autonomy is in decline. This is rooted in interpretations of Adam Smith's idea of the 'invisible hand': the market is able to regulate itself, and the government must adopt a laissez faire attitude to facilitate production and economic endeavours. See Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (London: Electric Book Co., 2001). Susan Strange, 'The Westfailure System', *Review of International Studies*, 25 (1999), pp. 345–354 argues that state capacity is being threatened by world market forces. See also Michael Mann, 'Has Globalization Ended the Rise and Rise of the Nation-State?', *Review of International Political Economy*, 4.3 (1997), pp. 472–96 for a liberalist perspective. On the other hand, historical materialists would argue that the very entity and structure of the nation-state is a product of capitalist modes of production. The economic and political are thus united in the entity we understand as the state. John Maynard Keynes is one of the founders of such thought, when during the Great Depression he put forth the necessity of government intervention to regulate the economy. See John Maynard Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money* (Adelaide: University of Adelaide Library, 2008). Using the UK as a case study, Peter Burnham is one supporter of this stance. For more, please see Peter Burnham, 'New Labour and the politics of depoliticisation', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 3.2 (2001), pp. 127–49.

translations of literary works, which ultimately amounts to identity politics. She calls for a comprehensive ‘collectivity’,¹² one which allows different parts to come together without any form of reduction taking place. The impact of this is thought to be two-fold. First, it enables us to cross disciplinary borders. Second, it facilitates a new way of understanding the world as a comprehensive whole, reading across geopolitical borders of our international society.

By identifying states, economies and peoples as complex and multilayered networks where the division of the global often creates the ‘imposition of the same system of exchange everywhere [i]n the gridwork of electronic capital’¹³ as well as a ‘differentiated political space’¹⁴ - but also enhances ‘planetary’¹⁵ collectivity. Spivak argues that peoples are always resisting, engaging with and negotiating with the hegemony of the state, as well as the impositions of market forces, where the market may or may not be in agreement with the state. People do this from personal perspectives, rather than as representatives of larger collectivities.¹⁶

In addition to opposing the above described ‘differentiated political space’, the artists and writers and their works discussed here are also in conflict with oppressive patriarchal traditions of creative expression and thought. What the former and latter complexes of forms of hegemony have in common is that they all impose a one-dimensional, exclusivist worldview.

¹² Spivak, ‘Collectivities’ and ‘Planetaryity’, in *Death of a Discipline*, pp. 25-70; pp. 71-102.

¹³ Spivak, ‘Planetaryity’, in *Death of a Discipline*, p. 72.

¹⁴ Spivak, ‘Planetaryity’, in *Death of a Discipline*, p. 72.

¹⁵ Bauman calls this idea ‘glocalisation’. For more on this see Zygmunt Bauman, ‘Glocalization and hybridity’, *Glocalism: Journal of culture, politics and innovation*, 1 (2013), p. 1.

¹⁶ This distinction between groups and individuals is something which Zygmunt Bauman has discussed. He writes of two spaces: ‘space of flows’ and ‘space of places’. The ‘space of flows’ involves people confronting each other ‘primarily as members of ‘imagined totalities’. This could be seen to be a result of what Spivak called globalization’s division of space, creating definite borders and identities. Another space existing alongside this is the ‘space of places’ whereby people confront one another as ‘personal’ individuals, rather than abstract ‘types’. Bauman, ‘Glocalization and hybridity’, p. 3.

Such a creation of ‘imagined totalities’ as well as the ‘imposition of the same system of exchange’, has exerted tremendous pressures on artists and writers, and has imposed on them, wittingly or otherwise, a new set of rules that impinge on their individuality, curtail their creative freedom, and above all, distort the expression of their lived experiences.

Towards a definition of the poetics of resistance

Memories as sites of resistance to these homogenizing forces of globalisation and nationalism can only be understood by studying *how* the meaning of such memories is constructed. Each work of art or literature has its own specific way of communicating meaning, which in turn shows strong stances towards oppression. Such meaning is transmitted through ‘poetics’, understood as stylistic devices to create meaning as proposed by Michael Riffaterre in his reading of poetry.¹⁷ As Arturo Casas and Ben Bollig argue, poetics may be used to refer to devices to construct meaning not only in poetry, but also in other artistic fields of expression.¹⁸ Moreover, Casas and Bollig’s thesis concerns the ways in which resistance is communicated and hence how its meaning is staged through the aesthetics used in the memory games of works of visual art and literature.

Yet I would be more specific than they are in their usage of the term ‘poetics’ in relation to resistance. For them, ‘the poetics of resistance’ are produced through the

¹⁷ Michael Riffaterre, ‘Describing Poetic Structures: Two Approaches to Baudelaire’s *les Chats*’, *Yale French Studies*, 36-7 (1966), pp. 188-230; Michael Riffaterre, *The Semiotics of Poetry* (Bloomington; London: Indiana University Press, 1978).

¹⁸ ‘Introduction’, *Resistance and Emancipation: Cultural and Poetic Practices*, ed. by Arturo Casas, and Ben Bollig (Oxford; New York: Peter Lang, 2011), p. 4.

negotiation of the subjective and the collective, of reflection and action, and of practices and ideologies'.¹⁹

For me however, the stylistic devices of poetics including puns, image-word tensions and the reappropriation of physical objects into new contexts means artists use i. memories to form new ones, ii. the disassociation of words from traditional usage concretised by memory, iii. the liberation of institutionalised visual images and literary metaphors (for example national symbols like flags and dress), iv. The placement of canonical works of literature in an ambiguous setting partially covered by paint, v. the juxtaposition of legible words with 'pseudo' letters and vi. the insertion of museum or independent art spaces²⁰ into the literary space of the novel. As such uniting these stylistic devices is a constant negotiated tension between individual expression and collective knowledge and memory.

Delineating boundaries: the visual arts-literatures field

There have been different approaches to comparative readings of visual arts and literatures of the Arab world. Whilst there have been many writers and artists who have studied the affinity between these two fields of cultural production,²¹ there have

¹⁹ 'Introduction', *Resistance and Emancipation*, p. 3.

²⁰ This thesis distinguishes between museums, commercial galleries and independent art spaces. Museums house collections as places of learning and engagement. Commercial galleries stage exhibitions ultimately for profit, although they also serve to introduce emerging artists to different audiences, as well as to support them. The term independent creative space is used to understand *Absent* as a model of displaying art for private enjoyment, engagement, learning and preservation of creative forms, without a commercial intention in order to help understand the alternative to the museum in *Absent*. The author is aware that independent spaces may also sell art, with the intention to profit, but also to engage with public audiences.

²¹ Nizar Selim, 'Al-Shi'r al-'Arabi wa-fann al-Taswir', *al-'Amilun fi-l-naht*, 25 (March 1964), *Artiniraq.org* <http://artiniraq.org/maia/archive/files/al-amiloun-1964-march-nizar-salim-poetry-and-art_09f459b3f1.pdf> [accessed 21 July 2013]; Mohammad Saber 'Obayd, 'Rakan Dabdub: Bil tashkil a'eed siyaghat al-shi'r al-'Arabi al-qadim' in *Afaq 'Arabiyya*, 14 (1989), *Artiraq.org*, <<http://artiniraq.org/maia/items/show/200>> [accessed July 21 2015]; Shakir Hasan al-Sa'id, *Fusul Min Tarikh al-Haraka al-Tashkiliyya fil 'Iraq*, 2 vols (Baghdad: Da'irat al-Shu'un al-Thaqafiyah wa-l-Nashr, 1983), *Artiraq.org* <<http://artiniraq.org/maia/items/show/403>> and

been some others who argue that visual art of the Arab world cannot be understood through literature. Anna Contadini for example objects to reading Islamic miniature paintings through poetry because this 'offer[s] only general analogies, and it is difficult to argue that there is any meaningful correlation between the *techniques* of verbal and visual representation'.²² My approach is different to Contadini's in two ways: i. this thesis is more concerned with *poetics* than *techniques*, which is to say, the present study will concentrate on strategies of *representation and signification* as there is simply no space to expand beyond this theme, and ii. this research explores Arab painting through a contemporary re-imagining of juxtapositions of word-image.

Because I am interested in how words and images becomes sites of resistance to the traditions of their own making, I interrogate Mikhail Bakhtin's²³ argument that the novel is *more* capable than other literary forms to combine different art forms.²⁴ I

<<http://artiraq.org/maia/items/show/404>> [accessed 15 December 2012] all locate the relationship between visual arts and literatures. Bushr Ibn Faris, *Sirr al-Zakhrāfa al-Islamiyya* (al-Qahira: Manshurat al-Ma'had al-Faransi li-l-'athar al-Sharqiyya bi-l-Qahira, 1952) brought together literature and art in his work. Idwar al-Kharrat (1926 -) traces the relationship between poetry and painting in the art of Ahmad Mursi, in Idwar al-Kharrat, *al-Fannan Ahmad Mursi: Sha'ir Tashkili* (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-'amma li-qusur al-thaqafa, 1997); and Idwar Kharrat, *Fi Nur Akhar: Dirasat wa-ima'at fi-l-fann al-tashkili* (Cairo: Markaz al-Hadara al-'Arabiyya, 2005). Idwar Kharrat sees his own novel *Iskandariyyati: madinati al-qudsiyah al-hushiyah: kulaj riwa'i* (Cairo and Alexandria: Dar wa-Matabi' al-Mustaqbal, 1994), p. 5 as a 'novelistic collage', quoted in *Intertextuality in Modern Arabic Literature Since 1967*, ed. by Luc Deheuvelds, Barbara Michalak-Pikulska and Paul Starkey (Durham: Durham University, 2006), p. 148. Jabra Ibrahim Jabra in his essay 'Udaba' lakinnahum rasamu', in *al-Fann wa-al-fannan: kitabat fi al-naqd al-tashkili*, ed. by Ibrahim Nasr Allah (Aman: Darat al-Funun, Mu'assasat 'Abd al-Hamid Shuman, 2000), pp. 110–119 shows the visual imagery in the poetry of canonical Arab poets. See also Kamal Boullata, 'Visual Thinking and the Arab Semantic Memory', in *Tradition, Modernity, and Postmodernity in Arabic Literature: Essays in Honor of Professor Issa J. Boullata*, ed. by Issa J. Boullata, Kamal Abdel-Malek and Wael B. Hallaq (Boston: Brill, 2000), pp. 284–5.

²² Contadini, 'The Manuscript as a Whole' in *Arab Painting: Text and Image in Illustrated Arabic Manuscripts*, ed. by Anna Contadini (Leiden: Brill, 2007), p. 4 [emphasis mine]. Dia al-Azzawi also sees discrepancies between visual arts and literature in Dia al-Azzawi, *Lawn yajma' al basar: nusus wa-hiwarat fi al-fann al-tashkili* (Jersey: touch editions, 2001).

²³ M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 292.

²⁴ Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, 'On Interpoetics', in *The View from Within: Writers and Critics on Contemporary Arabic Literature*, ed. by Ferial Ghazoul and Barbara Harlow (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1994), p. 210 agrees that the novel is ready to bring together different branches of the arts. Dialogue between the arts can interrogate different hegemonic structures which rely on concrete understandings of symbols and hence move symbols amongst different signifying structures.

agree to an extent that an individual person's story and memories are narrated through objects in the novel. For example, in al-Sayyid Faruq's discussion of the complexity of signs in Badr al-Dib's (1926 – 2005) novel *Ijazat Tafragh*,²⁵ the centrality of time in the novel is demonstrated through the novelist's fears of 'pastness' and his subsequent efforts to eternalise moments by concretising them into a narrative form:

it is as though memory is composed only of pictures,
no relationship between them, no similarity of any
kind, pictures that each represents a presence that exists
alone and separate to everything else²⁶,

Faruq argues that to attempt any narration of memories will be a narration of images because as you tell a story²⁷ you are creating something artificial that does not exist in any specific point in time, because it is a creation of the mind and not of the eye. This is in agreement with Pamuk's theory of narrating the memories of the city of Istanbul and the memories of individuals in the city, through the narration of objects, words and images.²⁸ Whilst this may be the case, Bakhtin's approach does not entirely fit with the contemporary visual arts and literatures of Iraq and Palestine, as I will demonstrate.

Therefore, this study calls for research which transgresses disciplinary boundaries, allowing for more fluid and engaging understandings of visual arts and literatures from the Middle East, without imposing any notions specific to the written word onto visual art. For example, using al-Kharrat's analysis of Mursi's paintings – which argues that Mursi's visual language arose from mythologies rooted more in

²⁵ Al-Sayyid Faruq, 'Bahr al-Isharat: Maqala fi Riwayat Ijazat tafragh', in *Jamaiyat Al-Tashazzzi: Dirasat Naqdiyya fi al-Adab: Idwar al-Kharrat wa Badr al-Dib* (Cairo: Dar Sharqiyyat, 1996), p. 138.

²⁶ Faruq, pp. 140-1.

²⁷ For more on art and narration, please see Michael Ranta, 'Iconography, Narrativity and Tellability in Pictures', in *Art Theory as Visual Epistemology*, ed. by Harald Klinke (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), pp. 81-93.

²⁸ This will be discussed further in Part I.

poetry and literature than in visual art – evokes an appreciation of the complex relationship between the two cultural forms.

I think this is a particularly useful point to make, which I will refer to repeatedly in this thesis. For the contemporary visual art and literatures studied here, we cannot read visual signs as being *dependent* on literary works for their signification. Rather, visual elements in a painting may *engage* with and often *subvert* literary signification systems. It is thus crucial to base a reading of any artwork or literary work on the relationship between its internal and external components, such as colour, the occupation of space, the size of the signs, as well as how it engages with its wider political and social context.

To interrogate further how literature and visual art subvert sign systems the thesis here presented is that dominant paradigms of politics, aesthetics and gender relations are challenged in the selected writings and visual arts of Iraq and Palestine at the turn of the twenty-first century, so that the global response to the closed and finite sovereignty of states translates into social and cultural pluralism as a form of resistance through the negotiation and subversion of memories.

Cultural articulations display an amalgamation of intricate and multilayered interactions that traverse fixed notions of history and geography. Borders of all forms are called into question, demonstrating that cultural products are created in, and developed within a larger framework of complex intersections of philosophies, aesthetic establishments and political hegemonies. This is necessary to understand how cultural products function and circulate within existing economic and aesthetic structures of power that simultaneously limit cultural interaction, and how these products as such question and undermine the sovereignty of dominant world-views.

Bringing together word, image, and object as the foci of my study enables a richer illustration of how semiological frameworks push across the borders of their own form to engage in multiple dialogues with various networks of cultural and aesthetics modes, national and global economic networks and interrogations of political sovereignty and exclusivist identities based on gender, ethnicity, race and class. Although there is no literature review section, each chapter will engage with the relevant theories and scholarship pertaining to the creative texts in question.

Each work of visual art and literature works towards opening up the possibilities of identifying the collective and individual, against i. patriarchal hegemony, ii. traditional artistic values rooted in ancient heritage and colonial paradigms, iii. corporate and state sponsored narratives of the collective nation, iv. political manipulation of literary canons, v. the pressure to commit to exclusive narratives of the nation through the repetition of circulating symbols and religious texts, and vi. finally the insistence on closed identities to perpetuate the violence which enables corrupt regimes to benefit from the ‘business of violence’²⁹.

In effect, this thesis is marked by the call apparent in the visual arts and literatures studied here for the right to positive, open, plural and inclusive representations of i. personal objects, ii. the visual image that explores personal and political issues, and iii. the disruption of object-word-image oppositions to represent the projection for a future based on a multitude of gender, class, ethnic and semiological identities and structures. This can only be done through a re-evaluation of the role of memory in perpetuating these identities and structures. Moreover, such an approach is only possible through analysis of visual and literary texts not only on a word and image level, but also from the perspectives of material culture and

²⁹ LeVine, ‘Chaos, Globalization, and the Public Sphere’, p. 471.

museology, thus allowing for unusual variations and continuities between the chapters. For example, instead of making an analysis of Darwish's poetry used in the contemporary visual arts of the Arab world, following the model of Chapter 3 which analyses the interaction between the poetry of Ibn Zaydun in al-Nasiri's paintings, I chose to theorise Darwish's poetry, as a basis to understand the photographic image in Sabella's visual artistic practice.

Such treatment I believe presents a new methodology in Middle Eastern art history, in which using theory's reflecting on expressions within the same (Middle Eastern, and to a lesser extent Chinese) cultural context is favoured over reliance on 'foreign' Western theory which developed primarily as a result of an engaged analysis of Western cultural and literary products and is therefore less appropriate to reflect on other cultural contexts.

Theorising memories

In order to understand how memories are transformed, one must focus on the re-enactment or transformation of memories in the visual arts and literatures, preferably of works which engage with the same political issues. Najat Rahman's reading of contemporary Palestinian visual art works informs us that 'rather than simply preserving a memory of what was, before any displacement or loss, these artists present an artistic reenactment of the process of effacement of collective memory'³⁰. The artists whom she analyses are a combination of local, diasporic and exiled artists whose very existence defies the notion of a national community. To understand the works of the visual artists and writers presented here, it is important to

³⁰ Najat Rahman, 'A Memory for Disappearing Archives', in *In the Wake of the Poetic: Palestinian Artists After Darwish* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2015), p. 80.

note that their exiled condition enables them to see that ‘memory ‘travels’ [and that there exists a] dialectical role played by national borders (which are not just imagined, but also legally defined) in memory practices and memory studies’³¹.

This planetary approach to memories ‘opens up an analytic space to consider the interplay between state-operated institutions of memory and the flow of mediated narratives within and across state borders’³². In order to delineate such political borders, Spivak’s ‘planetary’ allows us to locate the objects, words and images studied here as sites of memory which interrogate rather than the above referred to political forms of borders, imposed limitations of creative medium, gender roles, and literary canonicity³³ promoted by nationalist agendas and consolidated by the global culture industry.

Apart from Ibn Zaydun’s poem used by al-Nasiri, all works of literature presented here have been translated into English and published by a different global publishing conglomerates, including Faber and Faber (Orhan Pamuk’s *Museum of Innocence*, the use of which I will discuss below) and Random House (*Absent*), as well as smaller non-profit, university or specialist publishers such as Verso, University of California Press, Bloodaxe Books, Unicorn Press and Saqi (Darwish’s several collections). In the case of the latter, most of his Arabophone collections have been published by Dar al-‘Awda, an Arabic-language publishing house focused on the

³¹ Chia de Cesari and Ann Rigney, ‘Introduction’, in *Transnational Memories: Circulation, Articulation, Scales*, ed. by Chiara de Cesari and Ann Rigney (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2014), p. 15.

³² Cesari and Rigney, ‘Introduction’, in *Transnational Memories*, p. 16.

³³ With reference to English Literature, Herbert Grabes, ‘Cultural Memory and the Literary Canon’, in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. by Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning and Sara Young (Berlin; New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), pp. 311-9 makes an interesting case for the literary canon as the archive of cultural memory.

literature and culture of the Arab world and promoting Arab nationalism and Palestinian resistance³⁴.

Sarah Brouillette's reading of postcolonial writers' self-consciousness of the demands of the global publishing industry is useful and invites us to further examine the kind of industry pressures writers are at times challenged by, and at others consent to, and the influence these pressures have on their work:

Though a publisher's emphasis on local biographical affiliation may work through a basic celebration of the representation of some 'other' region, it may result at the same time in readers' hostility toward (or praise for) the writer's problematic negation of (or triumph over) the same identified local circumstances. In fact, in a characteristic divide between the dictates of the market and the demands of a critical readership, the allure of a text's locality, authenticity, or biographical specificity, already perhaps an obfuscation of the writer's experience, is often taken as immediately undermined by its even having attained a position within an essentially compromised global culture industry.³⁵

In the case of the publishers Brouillette discusses, they are indeed global, in the sense that they support 'the imposition of the same system of exchange everywhere'³⁶. For Darwish, this sameness came not from global pressures, but from local, nationalist demands of his oppressed readership and the Palestinian political elite.³⁷ Similar constraints are experienced by contemporary visual artists, exerted by the global art market. This will be discussed below for example in relation to Orhan

³⁴ Abdu Wazin, 'Hal tastarji' 'Dar al-Awda' thakirat madhi jamil?', *al-Hayat.com* (26 June 2014), <<http://www.alhayat.com/Articles/3206841/>> [accessed 24 July 2016].

³⁵ Sarah Brouillette, *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 4. Brouillette has also written about the relationship between contemporary visual art and literature in her analysis of Ian McEwan's *Saturday*. For more on this, please see Sarah Brouillette, 'Valuing the Arts in Ian McEwan's *Saturday*', in *Literature and the Creative Economy* (Stanford; California: Stanford University Press, 2014), pp. 175-199.

³⁶ Spivak, 'Planetarity', p. 72.

³⁷ This will be discussed further in Chapter 2.

Pamuk's critique of museums in Turkey and such examples will help us understand the resistance to institutionalised art in Khedairi's *Absent*.

Orhan Pamuk: Theorising objects and 'monumental'³⁸ museums

According to Pamuk, the act of collecting objects from one's life counters the development of museums in Turkey, as the latter are seen by Pamuk as cheap imitations of Western paradigmatic institutions.³⁹ His theory of the object in material culture is that it has value and gives us information about the life of the user as well as that of the collector. For Pamuk, re-reading defunct or discarded objects⁴⁰ as valuable is part of the struggle against the power of flows of capital on local cultures and how they represent themselves.⁴¹

³⁸ Orhan Pamuk, 'A Modest Manifesto for Museums', *Masumiyet Müzesi*, <<http://en.masumiyetmuzesi.org/page/a-modest-manifesto-for-museums>> [accessed 7 June 2016].

³⁹ James Cuno, 'The Turkish Question', in *Who Owns Antiquity: Museums and the Battle over Our Ancient Heritage* (Princeton University Press, 2011), pp. 67-87 outlines the history of the museum in Turkey. See also Nurullah Berk, 'Resim ve Heykel Müzesi', *Ar Dergisi*, 4 (1938), p. 10; Gülsen Sevinç, *Milli Saraylar Tablo Koleksiyonu* (Istanbul: TBMM Milli Saraylar Daire Başkanlığı Yayınları, 2010); Burcu Pelvanoğlu, 'Türkiye'de Koleksiyonculuk', in *Eczacıbaşı Sanat Ansiklopedisi* Vol. 2 (İstanbul YEM Yayınları 2008) pp. 891-2; Esra Aliçavuşoğlu, 'Istanbul Museum of Painting and Sculpture as a Modernization Project', *Synergies Turquie* 3 (2010) pp. 79-90 <<http://www.gerflint.fr/Base/Turquie3/esra.pdf>> [accessed 11 June 2016]; and Ayse Koksak, 'Museum as a Transnational Space for National Identities', in *The Museum is Open: Towards a Transnational History of Museum 1750-1940*, ed. by Andrea Meyer and Bénédicte Savoy (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), pp. 233-44.

⁴⁰ Arising out of an awareness that value systems have differentiated between 'art' and 'trash', 'rubbish' or 'junk', I have avoided using such terms where possible. Jean Baudrillard is one thinker who has expressed that objects have different forms of value: 'functional value', 'exchange value', 'symbolic value' and 'sign value'. From this discussion, I have preferred to talk about defunct objects in the novel because their functional and exchange value are no longer relevant to the writers discussed. Rather, their symbolic and sign values are significant. For more on Baudrillard, please see Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (St. Louis, MO.: Telos Press, 1981), p. 66. Other works exploring the significance of objects are Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writing 1927-39*, ed. by A. Stoekl, C. R. Levitt, D.M. Leslie Jr (Minneapolis, MA: Minnesota University Press, 1985); Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966); and Michael Thompson, *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

⁴¹ Gillian Whiteley, 'Introduction' in *Junk: Art and the Politics of Trash* (London; New York: I. B. Tauris, 2011), p. 5.

Pamuk alternatively tries to create alternatives of the ‘monumental institution’⁴², rooted in the European museum tradition and ‘embedded in a particular narrative of historical progress that located the birth of civilisation in the East but its end and future in Europe’⁴³. Such museums displayed an imperial power structure, whereby throughout the

18th and 19th centuries [...] the roles of museum director, keeper and curator were often blurred and interwoven, but it is the term ‘curator’ that came to be closely associated with the custodian of a museum or other collection of objects – art or otherwise⁴⁴.

Today, the museums and their curators, both public and private, especially of non-Western cultural objects, have additional responsibilities:

Apart from the classical tasks of a museum that lie in the documentation, research, preservation and presentation of the collection, new challenges lie in the mediation of the cultural heritage of Muslim societies from late antiquity to today, in art, architecture and archaeology.⁴⁵

These challenges involve presenting objects within a wider political, social and cultural context to educate people, tell stories about humanity’s past, reflect contemporary concerns, engage the public and inspire creativity and critical thinking within multicultural settings.⁴⁶ In order to respond to such challenges, not just museums but also international art fairs, biennales and exhibitions have tried to be

⁴² Orhan Pamuk, ‘A Modest Manifesto for Museums’, *masumiyetmuzesi.org* <<http://en.masumiyetmuzesi.org/page/a-modest-manifesto-for-museums>> [accessed 7 June 2016].

⁴³ Benoit Junod, Georges Khalil, Stefan Webet, Gerhard Wolf, ‘Introduction’, in *Islamic Art and the Museum: Approaches to Art and Archaeology of the Muslim World in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Benoit Junod and others (London: Saqi, 2012), p. 13.

⁴⁴ Adrian George, *The Curator’s Handbook: Museums, Commercial Galleries, Independent Spaces* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2015), p. 4.

⁴⁵ Junod, et. al., ‘Introduction’, p. 13.

⁴⁶ ‘V and A – About Us’, *Victoria and Albert Museum* <<http://www.vam.ac.uk/info/about-us#our-mission>> [accessed 9 June 2016].

more representative of non-Western artists, and include those from Muslim societies. Despite this increase in the celebration of non-Western artists⁴⁷, such ‘multiculturalism’ is not without its flaws as it ‘represents a pluralist and inclusive institutional policy [that] has also produced new and more sophisticated forms of exclusion masquerading as inclusion’⁴⁸.

‘Local’ and ‘international’ contemporary art interact with different audiences at different forums. For the most part, art communities from big cities have the ability to enter the international urban circuit of the global art industry with ease.⁴⁹ Such hegemony, of migrant artists working in the West, creates new forms of cultural and artistic hegemony. Global institutionalised multiculturalism, just like the state, has power to define the status quo, so much so that it becomes accepted tradition, part of an official canon within cultural discourses and as such paradigmatically dogmatic in its own right.

Cultural institutions and establishments as such create new and more sophisticated forms of power constellations. Resistance to such ideological and institutional power could be organised through creating an alternative establishment. Pamuk’s attack in *The Museum of Innocence* (2008)⁵⁰ of Westernised (in the form of

⁴⁷ Anne Ring Petersen, ‘Identity Politics, Institutional Multiculturalism, and the Global Artworld’, *Third Text*, 26. 2 (2012), pp. 195-6.

⁴⁸ Petersen, ‘Identity Politics, Institutional Multiculturalism, and the Global Artworld’, p. 196. Art Basel is one such art fair. On its official website, superlative language is used such as ‘premier’, ‘most vital art’, ‘world’s best galleries’, ‘tradition of excellence’ and ‘world’s leading galleries’. See Art Basel, ‘About us’, *Art Basel* <<https://www.artbasel.com/about>> [accessed 9 June 2016].

⁴⁹ Petersen, ‘Identity Politics, Institutional Multiculturalism, and the Global Artworld’, pp. 202-3; T J Demos, ‘The Ends of Exile: Toward a Coming Universality?’, in *Altermodern: Tate Triennial* ed. by Nicolas Bourriaud (London: Tate, 2009), p. 79; and Charlotte Bydler, *The Global Art World, Inc.: On the Globalisation of Contemporary Art* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2004), p. 156.

⁵⁰ Orhan Pamuk, *The Museum of Innocence*, trans. by Maureen Freely (London: Faber and Faber, 2009). In order to distinguish between the novel and the architectural building of the actual museum this thesis will henceforth be referring to the novel as *Museum* (italicised), and will refer to the Masumiyet Müzesi Museum as the Museum. I will be referring to the fictional space of *Absent* as an independent creative space.

the global art market and its own internal politics)⁵¹ understandings of the museum institution which developed in Europe as a spectacle performing the superior power of imperialist nations⁵². Pamuk's novel pokes fun at imperial, Republican, and corporate-sponsored museums and galleries⁵³ in Turkey⁵⁴. The former imperial museums had European master paintings copied for lack of funds to buy the original⁵⁵ and the latter corporate-sponsored museums and galleries have been supported by the state to support Turkish ascension to the European Union⁵⁶ and to promote flows of international capital to the country.⁵⁷ Pamuk rejects this approach to museology which

⁵¹ For more on this please see *Contemporary Art: 1989 to the Present*, ed. by Alexander Dumbadze and Suzanne Hudson (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013); *When Art Meets Money: Encounters at the Art Basel*, ed. by Stephan Egger, Erwin Single and Franz Schultheis (Germany: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König); Georgina Adam, *Big Bucks: The Explosion of the Art Market in the 21st Century* (Farnham, Surrey; Burlington: Lund Humphries, 2014); Dirk Boll, *Art for Sale: A Candid View of the Art Market* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2011); Iain Robertson, *Understanding International Art Markets and Management* (London: Routledge, 2006); Don Thompson, *The \$12 Million Stuffed Shark: The Curious Economics of Contemporary Art and Auction Houses* (London: Aurum, 2008); Hans Abbing, *Why Art Artists Poor?: The Exceptional Economy of the Arts* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2002); *The Art Business*, ed. by Iain Robertson and Derrick Chong (London: Routledge, 2008).

⁵² John M. McKenzie Argues that the museum developed into one of the 'tools of empire'. See John M. MacKenzie, *Museums and Empire: Natural History, Human Cultures and Colonial Identities* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), p. 7. For more on the history of museum practices displaying and curating empire, please see *Curating Empire: Museums and the British Imperial Experience*, ed. by Sarah Longair and John McAleer (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012).

⁵³ The first purpose-built museum in the Ottoman Empire was the Imperial Museum (Müze-i Hümayun) in 1869, after Sultan Abdülaziz's 1867 visit to Europe. After the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923, plans to open an art museum with new works by Turkish artists were realised. In this light, Istanbul's Museum of Painting and Sculpture opened in 1938 by the direct request of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881-1938). Collection of copies which were at the Imperial Museum were not included in the new Museum of Painting and Sculpture. Shaw, *Ottoman Painting*, p. 116.

⁵⁴ Just like some of the postcolonial writers which Brouillette discusses, Pamuk is marginalized in Turkey because of his stance towards the Armenian genocide. In the press he was attacked as having insulted 'Turkishness'. Rejected at home because of his political stance, rather than his literary abilities (or lack of), he is celebrated abroad, having won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2006. For more on Pamuk's marginalization, see Maureen Freely, 'Why they killed Hrant Dink', in *Eurozine*, (2007), <<http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2007-06-06-freely-en.html>> [accessed 24 July 2016].

⁵⁵ For a specific example of this, see Nurullah Berk's analysis of Turkish artists' aesthetics comparing them to their European contemporaries in Berk, 'Resim ve Heykel Müzesi', p. 10 referenced in Aliçavuşoğlu, 'Istanbul Museum of Painting and Sculpture as a Modernization Project', p. 87.

⁵⁶ Julian Stallabrass, *Contemporary Art: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 25-26; Jean-Francois Polo, 'The Istanbul Modern Art Museum: An Urban Regeneration Project?', *European Planning Studies*, 23.8 (2015), pp. 1511-28.

⁵⁷ One such evidence of this is the corporate sponsorship of one of Istanbul's major art fairs, Contemporary Istanbul. To support my idea that art and the flow of global capital are heavily intertwined in Istanbul, Murat Göllü has stated 'our chief responsibility as Akbank is to support economic growth. On the other hand, as one of the most reputable brands and institutions in Turkey, we are aware that this responsibility is far more substantial than mere banking business to create the future of Turkey. In this respect, we embrace Cultural & Art, Entrepreneurship [sic.], and Educational

narrates the ‘epic of the nation, the epic of the kings’⁵⁸. He attempts to reverse the fascination with institutions rooted in ‘the historical narratives of a society, community, team, nation, state, tribe, company or species’⁵⁹. Instead he focuses on the museum’s ‘capacity to reveal the humanity of individuals’⁶⁰ using quotidian, ‘cheap’⁶¹ objects, in order to ‘honor the neighbourhoods and streets and the homes and shops nearby’⁶².

This approach is in reaction to the use of the museum as a visual and spatial institution of national memories where objects act as witnesses of history. Timothy Mitchell, in his discussion of colonisation in Egypt, explains how the museum, itself an emblem of ‘high’ culture that has its origins in European Enlightenment during the seventeenth century, becomes an important institution for Arab states⁶³ that wish to display heritage and ‘high’ culture.⁶⁴ What was collected, and who was represented became an ideological battleground over memory of the nation and hence history.

activities and we exert our utmost energy to this cause.’ Murat Göllü, ‘Akbank Sanat continues to support arts and culture in the new season’, *CI Mag*, 3 (September 2015), p. 15.

⁵⁸ Orhan Pamuk, Google Cultural Institute, ‘Art Talk - Hangout with Orhan Pamuk, Museum of Innocence & Lucia Pini, Museo Bagatti Valsecchi’, *YouTube*, 27 February 2015, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MqxGPTMbWf4>> [accessed 10 May 2015].

⁵⁹ Orhan Pamuk, ‘A Modest Manifesto for Museums’, in *The Innocence of Objects: The Museum of Innocence, Istanbul*, trans. by Ekin Oklap (New York: Abrams, 2012), p. 56.

⁶⁰ Pamuk, ‘A Modest Manifesto for Museums’, p. 56.

⁶¹ Pamuk, ‘A Modest Manifesto for Museums’, p. 57.

⁶² Pamuk, ‘A Modest Manifesto for Museums’, p. 57.

⁶³ Soon after the Ottoman Archaeological Museum opened in Istanbul, museums spread across the Arab world, where they were established in Baghdad, Beirut, Cairo, Damascus and Jerusalem. These were mostly museums of antiquities and archaeological heritage. Unfortunately, shortly after the National Museum’s fiftieth anniversary, it was subject to severe damage and plundering during and after the 2003 invasion. But this is not to say that Iraq’s cultural and artistic collections were not already under much threat. Iraq has witnessed much illegal trafficking of its antiquities way before 2003. As early as the 1990s, the international community became part of the illegal Iraqi art market, as international, reputable auction houses, international borders and airports witnessed the landing of Iraqi art and antiquities on its doorsteps.

⁶⁴ Timothy Mitchell, ‘Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order’, in *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*, ed. by Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 442-61; Timothy Mitchell, ‘Egypt at the exhibition, in *Colonising Egypt* (Berkeley: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 1-33.

Museum destruction therefore may be seen as not just a ‘destruction of history’⁶⁵, a ‘historical landscape and realms of memory around which people define their collective identities’⁶⁶, but rather a demolition of one *version* of a collective story.

Khedairi narrates the demise of visual art and its institutions, whilst also penning down what Pamuk calls ‘ordinary, everyday stories of individuals [which] are richer, more human, and more joyful [than historical narratives]’⁶⁷. Iraq’s history of the museum will allow us to appreciate the poetics underlying Khedairi’s resistance to institutionalised art. In the nineteenth century European archaeologists and institutions laid claim to Iraq’s archaeology and antiquities, and as a result many artifacts remain to this day at institutions such as the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum.⁶⁸ In the inter-war years, Iraq was engaged intensely in dialogue with the British to create its own ‘national’ archaeology institutions and scholarship. Gertrude Bell was an instrumental figure in setting up the Baghdad Archaeology Museum (BAM)⁶⁹ which King Faisal I opened on June 14th 1926⁷⁰. The BAM was initiated by her responsibility in 1922 to formulate a new Iraqi archaeology policy.⁷¹ Between

⁶⁵ Zainab Bahrani, ‘Archaeology and the Strategies of War’, in *Cultural Cleansing in Iraq: Why Museums Were Looted, Libraries Burned and Academics Murdered*, ed. by Raymond W. Baker, Shereen T. Ismael and Tareq Y. Ismael (New York: Pluto Press, 2010), p. 67. Other works that deal with the looting of the Baghdad Museum include Lawrence Rothfield, *The Rape of Mesopotamia: Behind the Looting of the Iraq Museum* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2009); *The Looting of the Iraq Museum, Baghdad: The Lost Legacy of Ancient Mesopotamia*, ed. by Milbry Polk and Angela M. H. Schuster (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2005); and Nada Shabout, ‘The Iraqi Museum of Modern Art: Ethical Implication’, *A Journal for Museum and Archives Professionals from the Practical to the Philosophical*, 2.4 (2006), pp. 285-298.

⁶⁶ Bahrani, ‘Archaeology and the Strategies of War’, p. 68.

⁶⁷ Orhan Pamuk, ‘A Modest Manifesto for Museums’, p. 55.

⁶⁸ These two British institutions put pressure on the Government to ‘bolster British national collections’. Magnus T. Bernhardsson, *Relaiming a Plundered Past: Archaeology and Nation Building in Modern Iraq* (Texas: University of Texas Press, 2005), p. 72. See also H. V. F. Winstone, *Gertrude Bell* (London: Jonathon Cape, 1978), pp. 242-3.

⁶⁹ The Museum was moved to another site in 1966. The Baghdad Archaeology Museum became the National Museum of Iraq. ‘About the Museum’, *The Iraqi Museum*, <<http://www.iraqmuseum.org/pages/about-the-museum>> [accessed 15 August 2015].

⁷⁰ It was opened to the public two days later on 16th June 1926. See Gertrude Bell, 16th June 1926, *Gertrude Bell Archive* <http://www.gerty.ncl.ac.uk/letter_details.php?letter_id=914> [accessed 25 April 2016].

⁷¹ Bernhardsson, *Relaiming a Plundered Past*, p. 65.

1922 and 1926 she established Iraq's Antiquities Act, placing archaeology and the preservation of antiquities firmly on Iraq's political agenda.⁷² As well as being involved in excavations, cataloguing, repairing and preserving antiquities, Bell concerned herself with the security of the Iraq Museum in Baghdad.⁷³ Decades later, the Saddam Centre for the Arts opened in Baghdad in 1986, which hosted several international art festivals.⁷⁴

As *Absent* tells the story of the destruction of Iraq's visual arts, monuments and cultural infrastructure such as the museum and the art gallery, we are also reading about the erasure of one realm of memory. Simultaneously, independent art-spaces are being created, showing the potential of resistance by using contesting memories in novels' depiction of objects and images.

To demonstrate this, I use Pamuk's *Museum* and autobiography *Istanbul* to reach an understanding of the collection of discarded objects in *Absent*. Pamuk's treatment of 'trash'⁷⁵ collection is to give power back to objects which have been hidden from public display because they were designated as shameful⁷⁶. Through Pamuk we can understand Khedairi's use of quotidian objects to create new memories

⁷² Here we can see that museums and state ideology are not separate. This is in agreement with Pamuk's stance that museums have traditionally served as sites symbolising and propagating historical narratives. In the case of the Iraq Museum, it embodies nationalist ideals. B M Fagan, *Return To Babylon: travelers, archaeologists, and monuments in Mesopotamia* (Colorado: University Press of Colorado, 2007), p. 341. For more on the creation of nationalist sentiments and the Iraq Museum see Erin Lewis, 'Gertrude Bell and Archaeology in Iraq: from World War I to the 'War on Terror'', *The Post Hole*, 9 (January 2010), p. 18 <http://www.theposthole.org/sites/theposthole.org/files/downloads/posthole_9_64.pdf> [accessed 7 June 2016].

⁷³ Gertrude Bell took pains to ensure the new Iraq Museum was well protected. In a letter to her father, she writes: 'I also discussed with the police how we should protect the new museum. We have such a number of very valuable things which you can't keep in safes for they must be exhibited and safes are not good for that.' For more see Gertrude Bell, 16th March 1926, *Gertrude Bell Archive*, <http://www.gerty.ncl.ac.uk/letter_details.php?letter_id=891> [accessed 25 April 2016].

⁷⁴ In 2006 it was renamed the National Museum of Modern Art. Steven Myrers, 'Iraq's Modern Art Collection, Waiting to Re-Emerge', *Nytimes.com*, 2010 <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/14/arts/design/14moma.html?_r=1> [accessed 26 April 2016].

⁷⁵ Pamuk, *Museum*, p. 695.

⁷⁶ Pamuk, *Museum*, p. 695.

of peoples' everyday lives. *Absent* adopts a dismantling of the aesthetic structures institutionalised by the 'Ruwwad' group of 1950s Baghdad⁷⁷. From the perspective of the early 2000s, Khedairi's female character pokes fun at this patriarchal, elitist institutionalised art tradition which devalues and ridicules female handicrafts. Khedairi is calling for a heterodox break with Western-modelled aesthetic values that have formed an exclusive art canon,⁷⁸ and have oppressed other forms of creativity. For her the only way to break out of this elitist masculine circle, that relies on the power of nationalist historical memory, is to lose it in favour of the mundane, the frivolous, the quotidian and the vulgar by establishing an independent art space. This cannot be done without including the emotions and lived realities of women in Baghdad during the sanction years within a post-nationalistic framework of narrating the lives of the Iraqi people.

As Iraq's relationship with notions of the nation-state is fairly neutral considering Iraq's national unity despite civil unrest, poverty and state dictatorship the relationship with mythical legacies could be more easily interrogated. Therefore, the independent art space also becomes a site whereby power can be returned to the subaltern, marginalised figures and their individual narratives. As opposed to presenting the narratives of kings and presidents, the narratives of these subaltern

⁷⁷ This group had its first exhibition in 1950 and included Nuri Bahjat, Fa'iq Hasan, 'Issa Hanna, Mahmud Sabri, Zaid Salih, Ismail and Susan Sheikhly, and Khalid al-Qassab. May Muzaffar, 'Iraqi Contemporary Art: Roots and Development', in *Iraq: Its History, People, and Politics*, ed. by Shams C. Inati (Amherst, N.Y.: Humanity Books, 2003), p. 71. See also Ulrike al-Khamis, 'An Historical Overview 1900s-1990s', in *Strokes of Genius: Contemporary Iraqi Art*, ed. by Maysaloun Faraj (London: Saqi, 2001), p. 23; 'Ata Sabri, 'al-Nashat al-Thaqafi fi-l-'Alam al-'Arabi', *al-Adab*, 1.7 (1953), pp. 70-1 <<http://artiraq.org/maia/items/show/219>> [accessed 11 June 2016]; Jalil Kamal al-Din, 'Ta'ammulat ..fi ma'radh al-Ruwwad', *Al-Adab*, 6.5 (1958), pp. 87-90 <<http://artiraq.org/maia/items/show/217>> [accessed 11 June 2016]; and Abdulrahman al-Azzawi, 'Dirasat fi-l-fann al-'Iraqi al-mu'asir', *Al-Adab*, 14.4 (1966), pp. 75-77 <<http://artiraq.org/maia/items/show/224>> [accessed 11 June 2016] for artists who later joined this group.

⁷⁸ Artist Grayson Perry (1960 -) has written and talked about art and value in his Reith Lectures. Grayson Perry, 'Grayson Perry's Reith Lectures: Who decides what makes good art?', *FT.com*, 11 October 2013 <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/c37b1b6a-3017-11e3-9eec-00144feab7de.html>> [accessed 7 June 2016].

marginalised people are to be realised visually and spatially; the preservation of objects, not as trash, but as valuable possessions, is seen as such as the preservation of collective heritage through the *individual*.

Given imperial and later colonial developments' influence of the museums of the Middle East as shown above, the novel spaces of Middle Eastern literatures have the possibility to open up, question and interrogate the institution's role in showing what individual members of the nation have been experiencing. The museum within the space of the novel becomes the space wherein the fascination with Westernisation and internalised Western modes of thinking about, arranging and valuing art, is questioned. It is also here that there is an interaction with cultural memories.

As will be argued here, the novel is an allegorical narrative of the nation, and memories play a definitive role in articulating that construct. Museums, art spaces and novels can complicate allegories of the nation, and can present various insights about the state of the nation in a post nation-state context through countering established modes of representation. By creating new equilibria where the novel's writing of individuals' stories and the museum and art space's housing of objects relating to individual human creativity and civilization, to educate the public artists can on the other hand counter intertwined representations of the memories of 'imagined totalities', and on other other hand alternative memories of individuals can be brought to the forefront through the free flowing journeys between objects, words and images.

Memories of words and sign systems

To understand how words can embody memories, we must first look at some theories relating to sign systems. Using aspects of semiotic theory will be indispensable to understand how words can construct images of the past. Here, Charles Sanders

Peirce's complication of Ferdinand de Saussure's model of 'signifier' and 'signified' is suitable as he differentiates the 'representamen' from the object. Thus, 'what a word is', and 'what is a word a representation of' may differ. Words thus have the potential to be metaphors and similes.

Complicating this further, Peirce includes a third notion, that of 'the interpretent', which is the sense one makes of the sign.⁷⁹ He gives three basic types of signs: icon, index and symbol. The signifier of an icon resembles, imitates or is similar to the signified object, such as a portrait or a model car. The signifier of an index on the other hand is related to the signified through inference or observation, like smoke indicates fire and rain indicates clouds. A symbol however is more arbitrary in nature: here the signifier has a relationship to the signified made up by convention.⁸⁰

Peirce's theory of the sign is especially useful in reading the different parts of the painting and how these different parts function. An icon according to Peirce, is 'a sign which would possess the character which renders it significant, even though its object has no existence'⁸¹. An icon is non-arbitrary: it looks like what it stands for. As such an icon is a sign which can evoke objects which are not in existence as 'it [hypothetically] proposes to imagine [...] an object similar to the sign itself.'⁸² I hypothesise that the word can be such an 'iconic' significance in which the similarity between sign and object is conjectured. It may not be premised on reality.

⁷⁹ Charles Sanders Peirce, *Essential Peirce Volume 2: Selected Philosophical Writings, 1893-1913*, ed. by Peirce Edition Project Staff (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).

⁸⁰ Peirce, 'What is a Sign', in *Essential Peirce*, p. 5.

⁸¹ Peirce, p. 9 quoted in Mieke Bal, 'Seeing Signs: The Use of Semiotics for the Understanding of Visual Art', in *The Subjects of Art History: Historical Objects in Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. by Mark A. Cheetham, Michael Ann Holly, Keith Moxey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 76.

⁸² Bal, 'Seeing Signs', p. 76.

Relating to the signs *within* individual works of visual art and literature, the contexts *between* them need to be studied in order to understand how not only aesthetic boundaries, but also disciplinary and political boundaries, are contested by them. Julia Kristeva emphasised this interconnectedness of signs and their interrelation, negating the notion that signs are closed units of signification. From this microlevel, we are drawn into a wider discussion of the intertextuality of not only signs in visual art, but also words as signs in texts.⁸³

Using semiotics to understand how the usage of words as coded in individual and collective memories

provides a different [...] language and framework for understanding the multifaceted connections between image and society and image and viewer, and for understanding not only *what* works of art mean but *how* the artist, viewer, and culture at large go about creating those meanings⁸⁴.

This thesis will take the application of semiotics a step further. Semiotics will be used to understand how writers and artists create meaning and interrogate aesthetic and political paradigms through multifaceted interconnections not only between word and image, but also between objects.⁸⁵

⁸³ Kristeva terms this form of intertextuality as ‘vertical’ whereby the vertical axis of texts connects texts to other texts, and the horizontal axis connects authors and readers. See Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p. 69.

⁸⁴ Anne D’Alleva, *Methods and Theories of Art History* (London: Laurence King, 2012), p. 29.

⁸⁵ This thesis agrees with Umberto Eco’s stance that infinite semiotic readings are more hypothetical than real. Umberto Eco has an interesting chapter on Charles Sanders Peirce’s notion of ‘unlimited semiosis’, arguing that this notion of unlimited semiosis ‘does not lead to the conclusion that interpretation has no criteria [and] has no objects’. Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 6. For more on Eco’s discussion on Peirce, see Eco, ‘Unlimited Semiosis and Drift: Pragmaticism vs Pragmatism’, in *The Limits of Interpretation*, pp. 23-43.

Since Chapter 3 deals with photographic works, Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* will give additional insight into the relationship between memory and staging resistance. Barthes' work focuses on the myth of the referential aspect of photography, rather than treating photography as representing something analogous to what already exists. The photographic image is thus one that is both real *and* mythologised, relying heavily on memories. The referent, or that which the sign refers to, is both real and constructed:

Our vision of it is *certain* – contrary to the text or to other perceptions which give me the object in a vague, arguable manner, and therefore incite me to suspicions as to what I think I am seeing.⁸⁶

This denotes the awareness that visual images are capable of communicating meaning through creatively reproducing a real-physical concrete existence, almost *verbatim* reproduction, no matter how constructed that reality is. The painted, printed or written images studied in this thesis are seen as such reconstructed images of memories and realities, produced according to the methods, colours and textures the artists see as enabling an effective resistance to traditions.

Recontextualising images outside the realm of memory

One way in which to understand these mechanisms of meaning destruction and production, in images and words within the visual arts and within literature, is through iconology. Developed as a discipline by art historians, iconology attempts to explain and analyse how and why the images are used in the art works and what the

⁸⁶ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (London: Vintage, 2000), p. 106.

implications are for the broader cultural, political and social environment in which the art work is produced.

Erwin Panofsky⁸⁷ was one of the earliest critics to argue that form and content cannot be divorced from one another in visual art products. Every aspect of a visual work is intertwined with the meaning, ideology and purpose of the work as a whole, the style of the artist, the style prevalent at the time and place in which the art work was made. This of course stresses that form is loaded with cultural meaning. As such Panofsky's perspective on iconology, which I embrace, diverges from formalist acultural readings of icons and their meaning.⁸⁸

In my analysis, I relate the description of visual motifs in the art works studied, to how they are manifestations of resistance of global hegemonies inherent in discourses on gender, ethnicity, the nation-state (even though it is no longer understood through the Westphalian concept of sovereignty), visual art and literary traditions. They do so by playing with memories and as such dismantling of the borders of semiological systems of objects, word and image. Panofsky's model is hypothetised to yield fruitful results, as it enables a deeper and richer engagement with the literary and visual works that are studied here.⁸⁹

Structure of thesis

⁸⁷ Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanist Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1972).

⁸⁸ René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*, 3rd edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976). It is also important to see how Panofsky's influential reading of art resulted in a new critique of iconography and iconology, especially during the dynamic intellectual heat of the 1960s when a lot of theory, such as poststructuralism and semiotic theory, was emerging and being revised. This theory was more skeptical and questioning of the aims, assumptions and methods of art history. The main critique of iconographic analysis of art was the very basic and descriptive nature that some of Panofsky's followers tended to adopt.

⁸⁹ I agree with Svetlana Alpers who emphasised that Panofsky's method developed as a result of his readings of Italian Renaissance art which is of course completely different to the art being studied here. For more on this see Svetlana Alpers, 'Is Art History', *Daedalus*, 106.3 (1977), pp. 1-13.

Part I of this thesis deals with the theme of female transformations of traditional approaches to object collecting, based on memories of masculine hierarchies of domination that narrate the nation as the story of the postcolonial and patriarchal elite.

Through Pamuk's critique of the art system of contemporary Turkey which recreates the 'imagined totalities' described above, Chapter 1 tells the story of how notions of institutionalised art in Khedairi's novel *Absent*, which we will find are rooted in memories of class establishments and male narratives of fraternity of the postcolonial Iraqi nation-state⁹⁰, are replaced in the turn of the twenty-first century with museum and novel narratives that value everyday, trivial and vulgar objects of the present.

Absent deals with the violence of masculinity imposing memories of 'high' and established visual art onto national consciousness and relegate feminine art forms to 'low' culture. The novel resists a perspective of the everyday life of the Iraqi nation during the sanctions on Iraq in the late 1990s, as merely banal, through an assertion of the right to be frivolous, excessive, vulgar and trivial. It does so through constructing an art space within the novel to depict the tensions between i. 'high' or institutionalised and 'low' art, ii. 'masculine' national traditions of paintings and sculptures and 'feminine' innovation in the field, and iii. memories of the past and experiences of the present, through collecting vulgar and everyday objects.

Part II in two chapters, continues this line of thought of opposing the hegemony of 'imagined totalities' within the Palestinian context. Being at home and in exile, is argued to go against the dominant, necessarily national, discourses on Palestinian identity, and as such can be seen as a polemic against poetic and

⁹⁰ Mosse 1985; Pateman 1988; Hunt 1992, referenced in Esra Özyürek, *Nostalgia for the Modern: State Secularism and Everyday Politics in Turkey* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), pp. 67-8.

photographic ‘traditions’. Within the Palestinian context, which demands a fulfillment of nationalist expectations, not to do what is expected of you becomes a form of resistance.

Next, I will examine specific texts by Darwish and Sabella. Darwish’s theorisation of the poetic image is analysed in light of his resistance to i. being part of a national discourse that defines him as a spokesperson for the Palestinian nation, hence compelling his commitment to write only about the Palestinian cause; and ii. modern Arabic poetry that uses fixed symbols, myths and narratives to read the Palestinian land. Collective identity, constructed through ‘fictionalised’ mediations of history and scriptural and cultural myths, was used to depict images of the landscape. The commitment to write about a national cause was heavily implicated in the need to construct a singular articulation of a national collective identity where the Israeli occupation denied the existence of a political state due to the denial of a collective community.

Darwish’s poetry theorises a resistance against the aesthetic hegemonies of modernist Arabic poetry and the free verse movement. Modern Arabic poetry was rooted in translations of Western modernist poetry. Poets such as T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound’s use of mythology led Modern Arab poets to also critique their own landscapes within the frame of Mesopotamian myths and scriptural narratives. These Biblical traditions and historical orthodoxies, manipulated both by Palestinian and Israeli political authorities functioned to legitimate their respective ‘imagined nations’.

Sabella picks up on this challenge to established modes of visual representation through imaging the landscape and identity in his photographic works. His images supplant fixed connections between the photographic image and written

histories and the semiotics of the word to dismantle fixed, established notions of identity. As the violence in Palestine had begun to escalate and tension increased between the various civil societal powers (secular non-governmental organisations (NGO) and Islamist NGOs⁹¹), that oppose the PA, it became apparent to Sabella that the visual image of fixed identities of the land and individual humans was being manipulated in the struggle for power.

Reconnecting to the tensions between words and images, the final part of the thesis, Part III, suggests breaking down the boundaries between the semiology of word and image, in an effort to resist the chaos which threatens the plurality of the Iraqi identity. I will show how the paintings studied, in their relationship to the world, go beyond the national allegories of objects and museums, and move away from the focus on the human individual in their everyday and trivial state, to take us towards a higher metaphysical conceptualisation of human relations and identities based on memories of love, beauty and a dispersal of boundaries. Hence, to nostalgically imagine and have us imagine an alternative space of peace, away from the chaos brought about by the 'War on Terror' and the U.S. led military occupation of Iraq.

As such al-Nasiri's work is understood in light of attempting to resist the chaos of the U.S military occupation of Iraq, following the sanctions which informed *Absent*, through his series of mixed-media paintings 'Homage to Ibn Zaydun' (2010). His works are argued to be a visual attempt to reclaim memories of a lost paradise by engaging with aesthetic traditions and references to the 'past'. Through printing Ibn Zaydun's (1003 – 1071) 'qafiyya' poem onto the canvases of his paintings, using fairly cheap acrylic paints, and combining this reference to al-Andalus using brushstrokes and manipulating the space of the canvas, al-Nasiri coalesces the

⁹¹ LeVine, 'Chaos, Globalization, and the Public Sphere', p. 480.

boundaries of word and image to challenge the disorder that has weakened Iraqi society and is destroying the inclusive albeit national Iraqi identity that was enjoyed previous to the U.S military occupation.

Taking this a step further, al-Nasiri moves his aesthetic vision towards a metaphysical state that transgresses all boundaries through combining aesthetic practices emerging from Arabic, Chinese and Western traditions, as well as completely blurring conceptual distinctions between word and image. He does this in order to oppose the oppressive political organisation of community, which al-Nasiri feels narrows down the Iraqi identity from pluralistic to sectarian and kin-based. Artistic canons with rigid rules are also part of traditions in various cultures that force prescribed visual methodologies onto the artist. Al-Nasiri breaks free from the new establishment of defining Iraqi identity as singular and divided, as well as from the traditional art rules. He instead creates his own nostalgic vision, of an utopia in which art is freed of inherited or invented cultural, political and social dictates, by the purposeful manipulation of history, myth and the various political and artistic canons themselves.

PART I

Objects, museums and novels

Introduction

[Sitting rooms] were little museums designed to demonstrate to the hypothetical visitor that the householders were Westernised.⁹²

Working with trash as a raw material for art is not, *per se*, a political activity. [...] Meaning is usually dependent on an exterior state of conflict. There are no inherently politicised materials or art objects – there are only political ‘contexts’.⁹³

I’m afraid that this museum craze in the West has inspired the uncultivated and insecure rich of this country to establish ersatz museums of modern art with adjoining restaurants. This despite the fact that we have no culture, no taste, and no talent in the art of painting. What Turks should be viewing in their own museums are not bad imitations of Western art but their own lives. Instead of displaying the Occidentalist fantasies

⁹² Orhan Pamuk ‘The Photographs in the Dark Museum House’, in *Istanbul: Memories and the City*, trans. by Maureen Freely (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p. 10.

⁹³ Whiteley, *Junk*, p. 29. May it be noted that nowhere in *Absent* is the English equivalent of the word trash used, unlike in *Museum* where ‘çöp’ means rubbish. A recycling centre is referred to as ‘a warehouse [where] they separate used and worn out items in order to recycle them’ (Khedairi, *Absent*, trans. by Muhayman Jamil (Cairo; New York: American University in Cairo Press), p. 209). The recycling site is a workshop where consumed items and chemicals are separated to be reproduced. In fact, the closest we get to ‘rubbish’ in terms of negativity is the word ‘worn out’ or *mustahlika*. This is significant as the conditions of sanctions does not allow for things to be termed as rubbish, but rather are worn-out items with the potential to be reused in a different form. Recycling is an important part of life under sanctions, where the option to trade freely with new consumables is under strict international legal limitations.

of our rich, our museums should show us our own lives.⁹⁴

To identify, defend and critique the everyday is in effect to seek and reclaim the culturally and socially marginal and the cultural autonomy of the subaltern subject; the everyday is the site of the 'voiceless'.⁹⁵

The collection of objects is not a neutral act. The choice of objects, their display, and if in a museum, the labels and statements, accompanying them, all indicate a certain 'political 'context''. According to Pamuk, in the case of Turkey, the collection of objects within domestic interiors is a demonstration of Westernisation, as according to his narrator Kemal Basmacı in *Museum*⁹⁶, Turks have no 'taste'.⁹⁷ The Turkish home is where one can exhibit photographs showing family members robed in Western fashion, as opposed to traditional Ottoman attire. The living room described by Pamuk⁹⁸ also has the potential to exhibit one's complex relationship to Western forms

⁹⁴ Orhan Pamuk, 'Happiness', in *The Museum of Innocence*, trans. by Maureen Freely (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), p. 719. It is interesting that Pamuk has used the word 'imitations' to discuss Turkish art. Meltem Ahsika has argued that 'the framework of model and copy is embedded in paradigmatic assumptions deriving from a certain conception of modernity as authentically Western [...] the process of Westernization in Turkey, as a belated transferal of Western values and techniques, is bound to be distorted in the end because of the essential particulars of the specific space ('essentially stagnant Orient').' p. 12. For more see Meltem Ahsika, *Occidentalism in Turkey: Questions of Modernity and National Identity in Turkish Radio Broadcasting* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2010), pp. 11- 14. Specifically on Western art in the Ottoman Empire and Turkish Republic, see Wendy Shaw, *Ottoman Painting: Reflections of Western Art from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010).

⁹⁵ John Roberts, *Philosophizing the Everyday: Revolutionary Praxis and the Fate of Cultural Theory* (London; Ann Arbor: Pluto Press, 2006), p. 121.

⁹⁶ Kemal is *Museum*'s protagonist and the novel's first narrator, if we are to understand that he first told the narrative to Orhan Bey.

⁹⁷ Sibel Bozdoğan has written about the effect of Westernization during the Tanzimat reforms and the Kemalist Republican years on domestic spaces and living habits. For more on this topic please see 'Living Modern', in *Modernism and Nation Building: Turkish Architectural Culture in the Early Republic* (Singapore: University of Washington Press, 2001), pp. 193-239. Kemal's statement that Turks have no taste is itself a statement of self-proclaimed refinement, a class-statement positing himself above the working and lower classes of Istanbul. Pierre Bourdieu has theorised on the relationship between cultivation, class and taste in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. by Richard Nice (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996).

⁹⁸ Pamuk discusses this at great length in his chapter on living room museums in his autobiography *Istanbul*. For more on this see Pamuk, 'The Photographs in the Dark House Museum', in *Istanbul*, pp. 9-11.

and practices through trinkets brought back from trips to various European capitals, as well as forlorn, ‘unplayed pianos’⁹⁹.

Kemal’s dismissal of cultural insufficiency when influence is passed from Turkey to the ‘West’ is problematic on two levels. First, it assumes a monolithic West and, by implication, a singular and closed narrative of Western modernism which does not allow for the various ways in which exchange has taken place between multiple geographies, histories and cultures of the West. Second, his binary distinctions have not allowed for multiple forms of creative negotiation between older artistic paradigms and newer cultural expressions of Turkey, which would complicate his models of adaptation and divergence.

Read in this light, objects in this literary work should be understood as forms of culture which embody societal values; their meaning is negotiated at the centrepiece between vying hegemonic powers of political, economic and cultural authorities, rather than in light of the physical objects, which as we will see later in this thesis, cannot themselves be understood as being on the border between imitation and innovation.

⁹⁹ Pamuk, *Istanbul*, p. 9. Paul Dumont notes the piano to be ‘a most eloquent symbol of aspiration to a bourgeois style of life copied from the Western model’ since the early twentieth century. See ‘Said Bey – The Everyday Life of an Istanbul Townsman at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century’, in *The Modern Middle East*, ed. by Albert Hourani, Philip S. Khoury and Mary C. Wilson (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1993), p. 285. Serkan Özkaya (1973 -) has created an installation artwork, currently on exhibition at İstanbul Modern, ‘Üç Balon Yardımıyla Havalanan Piyano’, 2009, using a piano. To have stumbled upon a piano, and then used it to create an installation work, is interesting, as the piano in Turkish material culture and history of music is not divorced from the efforts to marry Turkey into Western notions of modernity. Unlike the unplayed pianos of Pamuk’s childhood, the piano on exhibition suffered a worse fate of abandonment, before being adopted by Özkaya. Just like Pamuk, Özkaya is also interested in alternative notions of museum spaces. For more on Özkaya’s stance, see his project ‘What a Museum Should Look Like’, <http://www.serkanozkaya.com/p_whatan.html> [accessed 7 May 2015]. Another artwork that is formed from recycled objects in the Turkish context is Handan Börüteçene’s (1957 -) installation ‘Bana Kendini Getir’ (2009), also in İstanbul Modern Müzesi, which employs 19 suitcases, 19 chairs and 30 magnifiers on wheels dates between 1890 and 1960, a period marking reforms in the late Ottoman period, as well as the turbulent Adnan Menderes years (1950 – 1960).

In this tension field of power, the personal can only be understood as engaging in dialogue, no matter how violent, with traditions of state, market and society. Thus, the discarded objects within Pamuk's space of *Museum* and a literary work, and Museum as an actual institution, relate to different versions of a wider collective narrative of Istanbul's Western-gazing elite, relegating certain cultural forms to the status of 'imitation[s]' whilst continuing their narrative of pressing against the hegemonies of imperial, national and global paradigms.

I will argue in this Chapter that the only way to understand the objects made by the marginalised women in the novel *Absent* is to read them precisely as sites of resistance, as such dictating a new national memory, away from the modernisms of Western traditions, patriarchy and imagined collectivities, and enhancing new subjectivities of unvoiced female memories through the vulgar and quotidian.

In doing so, the story of the novel cannot but have its narrator orphaned, young and inexperienced, with a lopsided mouth.

Having a parentless, facially paralysed figure narrating the story of people and objects of sanctioned Iraq defies the legend of authoritative historical myths, which carry with them the pretentious appearance of truth and heroism. By aesthetically resisting the hegemonies of narrative forms through someone seemingly naïve, we are allowed to see disfigured memories and ugly truths. As national myths are often embodied by aesthetic forms and objects, such ugly narratives necessitate the engagement of quotidian and ugly objects. In doing so, collective histories are not imposed on to individual memories. Instead, allowing for stories and objects relating to individuals enables a better understanding of the paradoxes, multifaceted nature and complexities of people.

Such an understanding of how the novel *Absent* employs memories as a site of resistance to uniform national narratives of collective identity, will be brought about firstly by theorizing *Museum* and understanding which aspects of Istanbul society Pamuk was trying to resist by establishing a museum housing individual memories in an effort to objectify the complexities of a collective ‘totality’ as I outlined in my introduction. By using this perspective as a prism, this Chapter will move on to understand which specific forces of hegemony Khedairi is writing against in her novel. This will then bring us to a better understanding of how cheap objects, contextualised in opposition to various hegemonies, are deployed in the novel as a site for alternative memories. As I will show, these objects embody memories of a new order as a locale of resistance against the crumbling authority of the state and its necessary national myths.

1

HIGH ART, LOW ART : OBJECTS AND NARRATIVES OF THE EVERYDAY

Turning against the past: memories of empire and state

Right from the start, Kemal, who is both protagonist and narrator, allows us into his world, which for the next 8 years and the remainder of the novel is filled with attempts to freeze time to embody the phenomenal and metaphysical in physical, tangible objects.¹⁰⁰ Considering Kemal's class background (he stems from an old, prestigious Nişantaşı Istanbul family), we could say that his financial ability to collect objects is far from improbable. The narrative construction of Kemal's collecting practices related to his relationship with his distant cousin and once lover Füsün, over whom he has a class advantage, could be Pamuk's way of critiquing the upper-classes' rising interest in art, and museum construction:

In those days bored Westernised housewives of the affluent neighbourhoods like Şişli, Nişantaşı and Bebek did not open “art galleries” but boutiques, and stocked them with trinkets and whole ensembles smuggled in luggage from Paris and Milan, or copies of “the latest” dresses featured in imported magazines like *Elle* and *Vogue*, selling these goods at ridiculously inflated prices to other rich housewives who were as bored as they were.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Pamuk, *Museum*, p. 11.

¹⁰¹ Pamuk, *Museum*, p. 4.

In the passage above, as in the lines opening this Chapter, Pamuk suggests that commercial art practices are problematic on many levels: first there is the issue of women being ‘bored’, and as a result making their primary occupation the passage of time, rather than a more serious pursuit. Another concern that is raised by Pamuk’s character is the fact that ‘trinkets’, and later art, will be sold ‘to other rich housewives who were as bored as they were’, indicating that the circulation of art takes place within a very confined elite circle¹⁰². The narrative of the novel, set in 1975 when art galleries in Istanbul did exist, albeit in small numbers¹⁰³. Instead of being engaged in the commerce of art objects, the ‘bored’ housewives are occupying themselves with intentionally copied fashion commodities based on Western origins.

By juxtaposing this description of mercantile activity in Istanbul by these affluent women with the reference to ‘art galleries’ (which women will later open towards the end of the 1990s¹⁰⁴), Pamuk is constructing a critique of art collecting practices. Collecting is shown to be a profiteering pursuit, defunct of engagement with aesthetic practices, and as a way to keep one preoccupied with some mere ‘novelty’. Therefore for the affluent class of these wealthy parts of Istanbul, Pamuk anticipates art’s commodification within global art market practices which will be more visible in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when Istanbul is taken up in the invisible global flows

¹⁰² Also writing in 2008, Süreyya Evren tells us that the contemporary art scene in Istanbul was indeed confined to international audiences, being internationally strong but locally weak: ‘the contemporary artworld is still going strong because Western eyes are focused on this camp’ in ‘Parrhesiatic Games in Contemporary Turkish Art Scene’, *Third Text*, 22.1 (2008), p. 39.

¹⁰³ Art galleries in Istanbul had indeed begun to emerge slowly since the 1930s. Towards the 1950s and 1960s however, their numbers began to increase, with the real spike in numbers occurring in the late 1990s and early 2000s. See Esra Çavuşoğlu, ‘In Pursuit of a Collection’, in *A Selection from the Huma Kabakçı Collection* (Istanbul: Pera Museum, 2016), p. 40 outlines briefly the history of commercial galleries in Istanbul.

¹⁰⁴ Of the Istanbul galleries, Galeri Baraz was established in 1975, Mine Art Gallery, Urart Art Gallery, Y. Kumral Art Gallery, Ramko Art Gallery, Tuval Art Gallery, Lami Art Gallery, Galeri Nev, Ankara in 1984 by Ali Artun and Haldun Dostoglu, later to open another gallery in Istanbul in 1987. Those by women are Pi Artworks, founded by Yesim Turanlı in 1998. Merkur Gallery founded by Sabiha Kurtulmuş in 2010.

of capital discussed by Spivak in her chapter ‘Planetarity’ and which has been discussed above.

Predating the engagement in post-1990 global art currents, Pamuk is showing us memories of an Istanbul which was still engaging various Western models. (Despite such memories embodying flawed and mythologised understandings of the complex relationship both of the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey had with Western forms and modalities of modernism.) Pamuk’s dichotomous reading of cultural exchange – imitation versus innovation – informs his introduction of the theme of creating fake copies of dresses in the novel.¹⁰⁵ This critique of imitation then comes back in the guise of Pamuk’s evaluation of the establishment of private modern art museums in Istanbul, once a free market economy is established in Istanbul, and Turkey becomes part of the global exchange of capital.

Being more exposed globally, Turkish interest in their own cultures to market abroad has initiated their participation in the same act of looking at the self not just as a way to pass time, but more importantly as a way to export their own culture within the global hegemonic system. Unlike Kemal’s later museum project, the art institutions that have opened up in contemporary Turkey (especially Istanbul, and to a lesser extent Ankara) do not simply serve to make people happy but project a self-image that is reflective of a larger ‘imagined totality’. On this subject of the contemporary art market in Turkey, Wendy Shaw writes:

At the moment that artists and audiences alike turn
away from the local legacy and write themselves into

¹⁰⁵ Writing of the how the value of antiques in Istanbul has changed, Nurdan Gürbilek writes ‘There are nineteenth-century glass ewers displayed in the window of an antique store in the Istanbul neighbourhood of Rumeli Hisar. They were not sold in their day because they were considered defective. Their defect lies in the drops of blood consumptive workers blew into the glass. Now they are priced as antiques.’ ‘Living in a Shop Window’, in *The New Cultural Climate in Turkey: Living in a Shop Window* (London: Zed, 2011), p. 32.

the global, they also turn away from the acknowledgement of art as a practice which has also been part of a local legacy and has reflected social change for nearly two centuries.¹⁰⁶

Thus, for Pamuk imitating Western fashion and art trends becomes not simply a West vs. non-West binary, but a way of 'writ[ing] themselves into the global', and out of the local, as the global becomes a totalizing regime with uniform flows of capital to absorb those of the cultural, economic and political realms. This seems to be a flawed characterisation of these affluent Istanbul women, ignoring their dress making practices as, what I argue to be, a 'glocal' (used in Bauman's sense) legacy of 'social change'. As such, Pamuk relegates these women to the status of imitators, while Pamuk's narrator Kemal collects these 'imitated' legacies in the Museum. As such, Pamuk

utilises the status of the victim to build a certain regime of power and to constitute itself as a hegemonic discourse. The category of the Other is interpellated within Occidentalism to produce a nativism by which other Others are produced, judged and marginalised.¹⁰⁷

It is a very similar 'process of othering' that Kemal is trying to tackle when he attempts to convince Orhan Bey¹⁰⁸ of the importance of constructing a memorial museum¹⁰⁹, which will show the lives and memories of these 'other Others': the

¹⁰⁶ Shaw, *Ottoman Painting*, p. 4.

¹⁰⁷ Ahiska, *Occidentalism in Turkey*, p. 7.

¹⁰⁸ Here I use Orhan Bey to refer to the character of Orhan Pamuk as constructed in the novel. I do this to differentiate between Orhan Pamuk the actual author, and Orhan Pamuk who is characterized as a writer within the frame of the narrative. I will discuss this issue later in the Chapter.

¹⁰⁹ Paul Williams defines the memorial museum to be a 'specific kind of museum dedicated to a historic event commemorating mass suffering of some kind.' Paul Williams, *Memorial Museums: The Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities* (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2007), p. 8. I use memorial museum to refer to a museum dedicated to a historic event commemorating the suffering of individuals as well as the masses. Kemal's love story was mostly an unrequited love story, full of agony and

women who have only been judged as imitators and bored housewives. What Pamuk derogatorily calls ‘imitation’, are, I would argue, acts against the authority of various hegemonic models in Turkey, and especially in Istanbul.

One such source of tradition was established by Sultan Abdulhamid II (1842-1918) who wanted the museum institution to a) represent Ottoman identity based on Islamic, Turkish and early Ottoman traditions, and b) provide a counter image of the Ottoman from the one presented in Orientalist tropes, as being a modern state. Such museums participated in the ‘invention of Ottoman public national identity to blockade these paths of colonial incursion’, whilst nonetheless having ‘adopted European post-Enlightenment forms of order’.¹¹⁰ Problematic for Kemal, is that these Ottoman museums did not even ‘address the Ottoman populace’,¹¹¹ including women, but were rather reserved for Ottoman male elites.

This elitism is renegotiated in later establishments, such as Istanbul’s Museum of Painting and Sculpture, which later added ‘copies of the most famous paintings’¹¹², as it was to become part of the nationalism embodying values of the new Turkish Republic. This Museum of Painting and Sculpture in Istanbul established Western cultural forms, such as Cubism, to represent ‘the social avant-garde’¹¹³ of Turkish Republican modern art. As discussed above, Kemal, Pamuk’s narrator doesn’t distinguish between form and content, seeing all such paintings as imitations.

torment. The Museum of Innocence commemorates his suffering as well as celebrates his enduring love for Füsun.

¹¹⁰ Wendy M. Shaw, *Possessors and Possessed: Museums, Archaeology, and the Visualization of History in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 2003), p. 20.

¹¹¹ Shaw, *Possessors*, p. 29. For more on details about the development of the first Ottoman museums see ‘Moving toward the Museum: The Collection of Antique Spolia’, ‘Parallel Collections of Weapons and Antiquities’ and ‘The Rise of the Imperial Museum’, in Shaw, *Possessors*, pp. 31-44; pp. 45-82; pp. 83-107 respectively. See also Alev Koçak, *The Ottoman Empire and Archaeological Excavations: Ottoman Policy from 1840-1906, Foreign Archaeologists, and the Formations of the Ottoman Museum* (Istanbul: ISIS Press, 2011).

¹¹² Halil Edhem 1924, p 40 quoted in Shaw, *Ottoman Painting*, p. 113.

¹¹³ Shaw, *Ottoman Painting*, p. 169.

Not only state museums embody larger metanarratives and metamemories, but so do the corporate art institutions that appeared in Istanbul in the late 1990s and early 2000s. These institutions have come to represent corporate efforts to include Istanbul in the list of global cities to attract visitors¹¹⁴, investment and global capital. These corporate-funded private museums established by the rich members of the Turkish Republic during the 1990s are directly resisted by Kemal, as these private museums have taken on the role of the state in supporting the visual arts of the nation.¹¹⁵

Kemal sees the only way to dissent against these hegemonies of corporations and national projects is to take control over his own individual story and self-image, by displaying objects from 'our lives' as objects of value and 'pride' of our memories rather than objects of 'shame'¹¹⁶ to be put away.

In this process of exhibiting his personal memories through a cross-comparative delineation of boundaries between paradigms of literature (novel) and visual art (museum and objects), Kemal becomes a 'bricoleur' working

between and within competing and overlapping perspectives and paradigms. The *bricoleur* understands process shaped by his or her personal history, biography gender, social class, race, and ethnicity, and those of the people in the setting ...[...]... The product of the *bricoleur*'s labour is a bricolage, a complex, dense, reflexive, collagelike creation that represents the

¹¹⁴ Alistair Hicks has noted that 'art is primarily used as a tourist attraction'. Alistair Hicks, 'Preface', in *The Global Art Compass: New Directions in 21st-Century Art* (Farnborough: Thames and Hudson, 2014), p. 10.

¹¹⁵ Evren's wonderful article 'Parrhesiatic Games in Contemporary Turkish Art Scene', pp. 35-42 gives further information about the tensions between state and art market, and tensions within the various hegemonies vying for power in the art world of Turkey. Another article which deals with this issue is found in Beral Madra, 'The Hot Spot of Global Art Istanbul's Contemporary Art Scene and its Sociopolitical and Cultural Conditions and Practices', *Third Text*, 22.1 (2008), pp. 105-112. Problematically however, Madra states that 'even after twenty years of fundamental infrastructural transformations, contemporary art is being produced, promoted and issued solely in Istanbul. International art experts have hardly penetrated any other part of the Turkish contemporary art scene and have therefore not contributed any kind of theoretical or critical oeuvre on the subject.', p. 105. Such a reading defines contemporary art as that which has been approved and validated by 'international art experts'.

¹¹⁶ Pamuk, *Museum*, p. 711.

researcher's images, understandings and interpretations of the world.¹¹⁷

A world which illustrates the creator's 'personal history, biography, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity' can only be represented through deploying 'bric-a-brac' in the narrative of the novel and the museum. 'Bric-a-brac', according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is defined as 'miscellaneous objects and ornaments of little value', originating from the French term 'à bric et à brac' in the mid-nineteenth century which means 'at random'. This term has been used by postmodern thinker Levi-Strauss in his *The Savage Mind*, defining 'bricoleur' to be understood as a 'Jack of all trades or a kind of professional do-it-yourself man'¹¹⁸ who makes use of what is readily available. He goes on to state that the 'bricoleur' is

someone who works with his hands and uses devious means compared to those of a craftsman. The characteristic feature of mythical thought is that it expresses itself by means of a heterogeneous repertoire which, even if extensive, is never the less limited. It has to use this repertoire, however, whatever the task in hand because it has nothing else at its disposal. Mythical thought is therefore a kind of intellectual 'bricolage'.¹¹⁹

Levi-Strauss continues that the bricoleur understands that all signifiers are historical productions, within a closed and finite field of the differential play of signifiers that are at hand, and that they bear no relation to a signified totality (or final project). This notion is then taken further by Jacques Derrida, who argues that:

¹¹⁷ *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. by Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, Calif.; London: Sage, 1994), p. 3 quoted in Whiteley, *Junk*, p. xii.

¹¹⁸ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972; repr. Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 17.

¹¹⁹ Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, pp. 16-7.

If one calls *bricolage* the necessity of borrowing one's concept from the text of a heritage which is more or less coherent or ruined, it must be said that every discourse is *bricoleur*.¹²⁰

As the narrative of Kemal's infatuation with Füsün unfolds, there are more objects being hoarded by him, resulting in an ever-expanding collection, reflecting both Kemal's increasing obsession with the woman which he cannot have, as well as a revolution in the material culture of Turkey during the late 1970s through to the early 2000s. This personal history creates memories not represented in the metanarratives of large corporate and government-funded museums in Turkey.

Successful museum-building requires of Kemal to not only be a collector, museum founder and narrator, but also a researcher and a 'bricoleur', as he is firmly aware of the processes that are taking place when he takes objects from Füsün's home, or from other places. He is able to look at his life, his 'personal history, biography, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity, and those of the people in the setting',¹²¹ through a critical lens, placing restaurant names within a larger economic and political context¹²², and analysing the history of social phenomena in Turkey on the whole. Thus, despite an initial glance which may deem Kemal to be a representation of the contemporary art collectors of Istanbul who are to later establish the first private museums in the city, there are far too many qualities which put Kemal out of the typical collectors' camp. In Pamuk's own words, talking of Reşat Ekrem Koçu, compiler of *İstanbul Ansiklopedisi*:

¹²⁰ Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', in *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 278-294, <<http://hydra.humanities.uci.edu/derrida/sign-play.html>> [accessed 18th September 2014].

¹²¹ Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, 'Introduction: The Discipline and Practice of Qualitative Research', in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2011), p. 5.

¹²² The restaurant names 'Hanedan, Sultan, Hünkar, Paşa [and] Vezir' are part of a wider Turkish obsession with the Ottoman past, and so this cultural phenomenon which still exists until today is part of the effort to look back to memories of the Ottoman Empire to imagine a stronger Turkish state. Pamuk, *Museum*, p. 14.

We might see our encyclopaedist as a typical collector who, after a personal trauma, withdrew from the world to live in objects.¹²³

Kemal could thus be a fictional representation of Koçu who, throughout *Museum*, slowly withdraws from the world and human relationships to seek refuge in objects. Unlike the private museum founders, who purchase art and objects through the intermediaries at commercial gallery or auction house¹²⁴, Kemal directly collects objects relating to his personal life and his traumatic love affair with Füsün himself. The act of collecting objects is not presented as an erratic project; it is an organised and chronological historical act that frames historical events and feelings within a physical collection of things. Through this Kemal resists the control and hegemony of the global art market's institutions including commercial galleries, auction houses, influential curators and corporate institutions that mediate and construct artistic value.

The absence of such a tightly controlled infrastructure seems at once to be a return to a more organic relationship with the material culture around us. Pamuk's staging of an additional narrative, that of Orhan Bey the second narrator, who lends a helping hand to Kemal in collecting items but also in setting up the museum, takes the perspective of Kemal as 'bricoleur' and his museum as a bricolage a step further. The idea of actually creating a museum that engages with the novel, the simplicity and ordinariness of the objects and the Russian-doll-like narrative structure that Pamuk uses, makes his authorship a form of 'bricolage' *par excellence* as 'a bricolage

¹²³ Pamuk, 'Reşat Ekrem Koçu's Collection of Facts and Curiosities: The Istanbul Encyclopedia', *Istanbul*, pp. 147.

¹²⁴ The first international auction house to set foot in Istanbul was Sotheby's in 2009. It is interesting to note that Oya Delahaye was appointed the first Director of the Istanbul office, who used to hold art exhibitions in her Paris interior design boutique. Robert Michael Poole, 'The Resident: Oya Delahaye's Istanbul', *Blouinartinfo.com* (September 2015) <<http://www.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/1227211/the-resident-oya-delahayes-istanbul>> [accessed 16 June 2016].

approach is in essence counter to linear, sequential thinking, narratives and practices'¹²⁵. In order to effectively oppose those dogmatic, hegemonic museum practices, it would not have sufficed to simply rearrange the narrative sequence; Kemal, Orhan Bey and Pamuk all take this a step further by acquiring 'bric-a-brac'.¹²⁶

The financial aspects of art described above can be related to social class as theorised by Pierre Bourdieu. According to Bourdieu, the fundamental motivation for collecting art or antiquities is to aid entry into 'high society', or social circles that are exclusive and difficult to enter¹²⁷. Thus, to purchase art means to participate in the same marketplace. He calls this the exchange of economic capital for cultural capital. Both the worlds of finance and art exist in capital markets, and yet where the one ends, the other begins. To collect art or antiquities is not just a practice for the elite, and a display of wealth, it is also where aesthetic taste is defined and projected. This all holds true for the safe deposits of Western art, where the markets are relatively safe from looting. Bourdieu adds that in order to participate in the collecting of art, individuals are necessarily already part of an educated group and higher 'social origin' in the Western context with the financial means to purchase fine art and cultural capital¹²⁸.

¹²⁵ Whiteley, *Junk*, p. xii.

¹²⁶ Outside the fictional space of the novel, Pamuk the novelist tells us how he was thinking of opening up an actual museum, and decided on the apartment at Çukurcuma, İstanbul after passing by it several times whilst dropping his daughter off to school. The novel was actually written whilst Pamuk was collecting objects. He then thought of ways to incorporate those objects into the narrative as it was being constructed in his imagination. This process is bricolage itself, as it is a complex collage of different styles, objects, periods in history, interpretations, time frames, narrators and media. The Guardian, *Orhan Pamuk tells Richard Lea why he made a novel into a museum*, online video recording, YouTube, 4 May 2010, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6kK8OxtNdUY>> [accessed 25 April 2014].

¹²⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. by Susan Emanuel (Stanford; California: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 262. See also Neil Brodie and Christina Luke, 'Conclusion: The Social and Cultural Contexts of Collecting', in *Archaeology, Cultural Heritage, and the Antiquities Trade* (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 2011), p. 304.

¹²⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, 'Introduction', in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. by Richard Nice (Cambridge; Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 1.

Fast forwarding from Bourdieu to the Iraqi context: What is the relationship between capital and culture, more specifically, and how, if at all, does wealth translate in the expression of ideas and values? In this dialogue between money and culture, what are the implications for memory games? To answer these questions, an analysis of social and economic structures established in the novel *Absent* will be made in the next section of this Chapter.

Re-membering the Ghayib: Memories of Institutionalised Art and the State

Abu Ghayib, *Absent*'s main character, and his collection of Iraqi fine art mirrors that of national museum projects which were abandoned since sanctions were imposed on Iraq in the 1990s. His act of collecting is one to preserve the (invented or real) memory of a strong state, also exemplified by Iraq's older cultural establishments, such as the older Iraqi art schools.

As Bourdieu has shown us above, we cannot separate fine art from the economic marketplace. Abu Ghayib fits this image: he struggles to preserve the relationship between fine art and a higher class distinction, in his endeavor of selling the art to wealthy elites that left Iraq for Europe¹²⁹. Just as his name suggests – which means father of the absent – Abu Ghayib is sexually sterile, and is characterised to embody similarly 'sterile' old aesthetic values and state metanarratives of Iraqi heritage and antiquities. He is unwilling to let go of national heritage, and national memories, channels them to the new waves of globalisation. Through the destruction of Iraq's political and economic infrastructure, it was in fact propelled into a different engagement with the world and became exposed to other social and cultural

¹²⁹ Khedairi, *Absent*, p. 245.

influences, ones that could be argued to threaten the unity and linearity of Iraqi art history up until that moment. Although commendable, Abu Ghayib's memories are patriarchal in nature, and omit women's participation in cultural life.

Unlike Kemal who resists telling the narratives of communities, kings and corporate institutions, Abu Ghayib wants to hold onto those memories as powerful, solid structures modeled by national art institutions around the great archaeological treasures, witness of the great civilisations of the past in Iraq. His obsessions with the vestiges of the waning power structures are so severe that he eventually makes do with posters of archaeological sites, a sardonic wink to the commissioned copies of Western master paintings in the early years of Istanbul's Academy of Fine Arts discussed above.

For Abu Ghayib the central role of the artists of 'Jama'at al-Ruwwad'¹³⁰, founded by Fa'iqa Hasan who later set up the Painting Department at the Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad in 1939¹³¹, in creating modern Iraqi art is fundamental to his traditional and orthodox conceptualisation of Iraqi culture and civilisation as being the oldest in the world. He is constantly citing the names of established and authoritative institutions and conceptualisations of Iraqi civilisational history such as the National Museum of Modern Art and the Directorate General of Archaeology¹³².

Throughout the novel, as Abu Ghayib collects more art, his skin condition, psoriasis, deteriorates. Running parallel to this, art objects are found in the meanest of places, ending up in the hands of uneducated, rural people, and are sometimes left to decay. His condition deteriorates up to the point where Abu Ghayib is himself forced

¹³⁰ Khedairi, *Absent*, p. 5.

¹³¹ The Institute of Fine Arts was previously named the Music Institute, established in 1936 under the director Sherif Muhyiddin Hayder. After returning from Rome, Jewad Selim was to head the Sculpture Department. Encompassing various art forms, the name was thus changed in the early forties. Al-Khamis, 'An Historical Overview', p. 22.

¹³² Khedairi, *Absent*, p. 9.

to sell his art through Jordan. Things take an abominably hapless turn as the dealer in Jordan cuts off communication and Abu Ghayib is imprisoned for illegally exporting Iraq's heritage.

The two events, of losing art and peeling skin, represent a decay of old values and hegemonies. Initially an innovative movement, the traditions integrated into the Iraqi art establishment founded by the 'Jama'at al-Ruwwad'¹³³ filters out of Iraq completely. Simultaneously, the old political system of Saddam Hussein's surveillance state begins to crumble as the threat of invasion begins to resurface.

Saddam Hussein's insurmountable passion for history and the past could be compared with Abu Ghayib's erratic excitement over Iraq's ancient heritage and status as 'cradle of civilisation' and Iraq having the 'first library [,] the first school, the first epic'¹³⁴. Collecting art for Abu Ghayib is a way of forgetting the present political situation (as well as his artistic incompetence, which may be a Freudian metaphor for his sexual sterility or impotence, and overcompensation for his inability to procreate sexually), by remaining transfixed in the past. Forgetting one moment of history, another moment of historical time is remembered and preserved, through collecting cultural heritage.

Collecting becomes the preservation of time and memory. By collecting art, and preserving time and space, Abu Ghayib is trying to piece together the fragments of Iraq's cultural infrastructure. His home becomes a utopian space which pays homage to what is now missing in Iraq, or what is at the mercy of looters and destructors of its heritage. In *Museum* seemingly mundane objects are collected and preserved to remember the past, whereas for Abu Ghayib the past can only be

¹³³ Khedairi, *Absent*, p. 12. The *Ruwwad* artists aimed 'to abandon the restricting and artificial atmosphere of their studios and paint directly within and from their outdoor environment'; their works are marked by nature, city and village scenes. Al-Khamis, 'An Historical Overview', pp. 23-4.

¹³⁴ Khedairi, *Absent*, p. 9.

reclaimed through the preservation of canonical artworks, which fails due to the devastating effects of war.

Absent is a novel partly about institutionalised state art practices, but also about how collecting art is a way to ‘forget’¹³⁵ the traumas of the present, which are processing new memories. Through treasuring Iraqi art and cultural heritage, Abu Ghayib is ultimately clinging on to memories as he tries to concretise an older national memory-scape. Possibly trying to forget the turmoil of living under sanctions in Iraq¹³⁶, as well as a fear of the change in world relations, the opening up of alternative borders and deconstructive questions of what constitutes art, Abu Ghayib is inadvertently trying to cling onto older established traditions.

The rush to collect heritage is not only about the memories of a strong nationalist state, but is indicative of Abu Ghayib’s class status. We know that Abu Ghayib was of a middle class background and a lifetime member of the Nadi al-‘Alawiyya in Baghdad which was ‘one of the city’s bourgeois features’¹³⁷. This place of exclusivity deteriorated during the period of sanctions, as most people with high

¹³⁵ Khedairi, *Absent*, p. 6.

¹³⁶ Much research has been conducted on Iraq’s heritage, which was looted and partially reclaimed during and following the years of sanctions. For more on this see Magnus Bernhardsson, *Reclaiming a Plundered Past: Archaeology and Nation Building in Modern Iraq* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005); *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*, ed. by Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago (Hants: Ashgate, 2004); Eric Davis, *Memories of State: Politics, History and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq* (California: University of California Press, 2005); Susan M. Pearce, *On Collecting: An Investigation onto Collecting in the European Tradition* (London; New York: Routledge, 1995); *An Anthology on Ethics in the Art World*, ed. by Gail Levin and Elaine A. King (New York: Allworth Press, 2006); and *Collections: A Journal for Museum and Archives Professionals from the Practical to the Philosophical* are all examples of recent publications that deal with the issue of collecting and museum practices. Most of these are testament to the application of theory to European and Western art, yet some of these also look at the looting of museums in Iraq and the impact it has had on the art market. Nada Shabout uses Mieke Bal’s connection between narrative and collection to understand the construction of the art market during the early years of Iraq as a nation-state. She gives many examples from the early years of Iraq’s modern art history, showing how early modern Iraqi artists wanted to create an art market that represented Iraqi identity independent of Iraq’s imperial rulers, in order to foster a sense of ‘social responsibility’ and thus helped to create and support ‘assigning higher value to Iraqi art in the local market’. For more see Nada Shabout, ‘Collecting Modern Iraqi Art’, in *Archives, Museums and Collecting Practices in the Modern Arab World*, ed. by Sonja Majcher-Atassi and John Pedro Schwartz (Farnham, Surrey, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), pp. 197 – 210.

¹³⁷ Khedairi, *Absent*, p. 15.

liquidity had left the country, and those who stayed's whose wealth had withered away along with the economy. Left in disrepute, the novel discusses the decrepit state of affairs in Iraq, the nation, the Club and other institutions including the galleries and museums. By filling that void in covering his apartments' walls with artworks referring to Iraq's (imagined) glorious days where art was enjoying state patronage and where collectors were able to purchase works, Abu Ghayib is forgetting one aspect of the present. By clinging onto memories of the various vanishing cultural and political establishments, he envisages a future that still bears witness to the traditions of the past.¹³⁸

In addition to preserving old memories, Abu Ghayib was initially interested in investing in property abroad, yet Um Ghayib (Abu Ghayib's wife) did not want their money to be in foreign banks. As a result Abu Ghayib invested in local 'banks' or local Iraqi art and culture. Here we see Bourdieu's notion at play that economic capital is translated to cultural capital: the novel seems to suggest that this was Abu Ghayib's way of compensating for his failure to become part of the 1950s Baghdadi 'Ruwwad' art group.¹³⁹ Khedairi seems to create a juxtaposition here in which to invest in local culture is an alternative to investing in foreign property. Rather than benefit the economy of a foreign country, Abu Ghayib turns to invest his salary in Iraqi art, whilst being aware of the weakness of the Iraqi Dinar during the years of sanctions. In true entrepreneurial fashion, Abu Ghayib sees the purchase of art as a long term investment, as he retorts to his wife after a period of nagging: "when I die,

¹³⁸ It is important to pay attention to the research done on who the collectors of Iraqi art were. Previous to the 1958 coup d'état, the main supporters and collectors of Iraqi art were the aristocratic ruling class, the bourgeoisie, the educated, the nouveau riche and the foreign community. This elite class often purchased art works as a status symbol, as a sign of prestige. With the revolution, Ata Sabri argues that the revolution had an important impact on the art market as art that was more overtly political started to be demanded by the collectors. Not only that, but the government became the main supporter and consumer of art. Ata Sabri encouraged and called upon the government to commission artworks and to establish national museums. Shabout, 'Collecting Modern Iraqi Art', pp. 197 – 210.

¹³⁹ Khedairi, *Absent*, p. 5.

you can do with them what you will””¹⁴⁰. It is almost like his testament would consist solely of art.

This confirms Bourdieu’s class-based understanding that fine art not only enables entry into an elite segment of society, but also is itself a translation of economic wealth. Although collecting art has no space for recognition in the world that Abu Ghayib inhabits, and there is no sense that his collecting, especially in the latter years of his activities, places him within ‘high society’, purchasing art for him has helped him to *remain* part of a (imagined) world that he feels threatened to be excluded from. Unable to remain amongst his artist friends through education as peers, Abu Ghayib sought an alternative route: to collect art and hence to replace his would-be friends of art school, with his new found companions in the art works. But these art works are not always able to be preserved in times of sanctions, or so the story goes.¹⁴¹ Despite Abu Ghayeb’s efforts, paintings are still crumbling, just as the Iraqi society at large crumbles:

This morning, my auntie is using a damp cloth to wipe the black mask. It’s a dark image of a face erupting from its ebony background. The mask frightens me. It has silver creases around the eyes and mouth. The brow is metallic. It thinks. Bright veins bulge around the skull. She cleans between the aluminium furrows. How she wishes that her husband would sell it before it falls apart.¹⁴²

Just like the damaged painting here, years of sanctions, wars, invasion and occupation in Iraq in the real world have left the existing museums in a state of disrepair and deterioration: valuable manuscripts have been stolen, lost, burnt, bombed or damaged

¹⁴⁰ Khedairi, *Absent*, p. 6.

¹⁴¹ LeVine, ‘Chaos, Globalization, and the Public Sphere’ demonstrates that it had been difficult in the wake of the insurgency against the U.S. occupation of Iraq for socio-religious networks to become a powerful force to maintain social and cultural functions.

¹⁴² Khedairi, *Absent*, p. 8.

due to the unfavourable conditions in which they have been stored, despite genuine attempts by the curators to protect the works against damage. Just like these curators of Iraq's museums, Abu Ghayib's efforts seem to be striving towards protecting the works even though in the grand scheme of things – for Abu Ghayib in his life and society, and for the curators in the global space they are now part of – they have been deemed incompetent.

Adopting canonical art works for Abu Ghayib becomes an act of reinserting older forms of life into the lives of Iraqis. These memories of the state and its institutions are not criticised by him, unlike Kemal's criticisms of Istanbul's 'bad imitations of Western art'. Rather, despite Iraqi artists being educated in the West, and incorporating Western styles into their own practices, neither Abu Ghayib, nor Dalal the narrator, nor Khedairi the author perceive the incorporation of 'Western' elements as a specific threat to the memories of the present.

From this discussion about the relation between memories of the past and art systems, or so the story suggests first that institutionalised art translates to wealth, and secondly that in order to participate in that market one must already be part of an established higher order in society, reached for example by means of money and education. Just as Kemal's discussion about copying Western painting tells us about tensions in the Istanbul museums¹⁴³, Abu Ghayib's act of collecting art enables us to

¹⁴³ Examples include the museums in Istanbul built in the 1990s, such as the Sakıp Sabancı Müzesi and early attempts at building a contemporary art museum in Istanbul before the final realization of Istanbul Modern, finally inaugurated in 2004 after several failed museum projects throughout the 1990s. The Rahmi Koç Museum of Industry and Technology also opened its doors in 1994. Another notable project involving the construction of museums is the museums of Istanbul Bilgi University. The latter museums project of the University was built on the site of an electricity power plant and distribution station. The creation of a cultural space out of an industrial space is an issue which Orhan Pamuk may have found problematic. The revival of art and culture coincides with the acceptance in 2004 of Turkey's candidacy to the European Union. Thus, the creation of artistic spaces have an ideological, political motive, which Kemal believes to be uncultivated. Museums should be created not in order to portray Turkey's need to be accepted by the West, but because of the need to show to the world the lives of Turkey's peoples. For more on the construction of these museums and the various architects

read his activities as being modelled against that of the imposition of the oriental despot or tyrant¹⁴⁴.

Another storyline not explicitly addressed here as yet, is that of Um Ghayib's seemingly crazy and strange collection of dead material, as a reaction to the oppressive tyranny of Abu Ghayib who mocks her creative efforts. But such tyranny is not to last, as we see such elitism crumble to pieces throughout the novel. What is contested in this novel is therefore not only the elitism inherent in nationalist paradigms of culture, but also in the male narrative characterised by Abu Ghayib.

To analyse how the old loses its hegemony it is important to come to understand the strategies which play on memories to resist power structures prevalent in the novel's universe.

The Ironies of History and the Decaying of the Old

The novel's opening chapter starts with the beginning of the decay of one form of authority, as we see Um Ghayib clean a painting which depicts a mask. It is in a state of disrepair and Abu Ghayib is unwilling to sell it is because of the memory that it holds for him, the memory around which he defines his identity. Thus, parting with the art equates him losing his identity, a theme later in the novel symbolically furthered through his imprisonment.

involved, please see Sibel Bozdoğan and Esra Akcan, 'The 'Young Turk Architects' of Globalization', in *Turkey: Modern Architectures in History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), pp. 263-97.

¹⁴⁴ Wen-chin Ouyang, *Politics of Nostalgia in the Arabic Novel: Nation-State, Modernity and Tradition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013) has a chapter 'Semiotics of Tyranny' which offers us an interesting way of looking at the articulation of tyranny, and tyrannical madness in Arabic literary discourse. 'The paradoxical attitude towards the past, the obsessive engagement with it and the flagrant disregard for its rules, is a form of madness that allows the subject to find a line of escape from the despotic regime of signs inherent in language, literary tradition and cultural heritage.' p. 136.

But his efforts are not to have an effect for long. The damage done to the nation's cultural memory is symbolically suggested through the hopeless efforts to contain Iraqi art within the country. Just like the 'brain-drain' by which Iraq's intellectuals and working professionals left Iraq¹⁴⁵, so does 'culture' flee with them.

If both the novel and the museum are vehicles through which projections of the nation are constructed, then we can say that in the novel's image the Iraqi nation is fragmented. This connects to another narrative of the Iraqi nation, that of its diaspora, which has lived another personal history, during a different time, in a different space. In this alternative space adjacent to that of the Iraqi nation-state, there is also a need to remember the past, to remember Iraqi heritage, and to forget about the misfortunes that caused exile. The existence of a market for Iraqi art in London, suggests that art has permeated borders, pointing to a whole new network of trade, migrations, global order and power structures.¹⁴⁶

In the novel this has taken the form of illegal and unauthorised smuggling.

In order not to attract attention, and the suspicion of visitors, Abu Ghayib finds himself confronted with patches on the walls of accumulated dust¹⁴⁷ after have replaced high quality, fine paintings with posters produced by the Directorate of Antiquities using 'Scotch tape'¹⁴⁸: the 'marks'¹⁴⁹ left after removing works of modern and contemporary art are covered by posters

¹⁴⁵ Ahmed M. Jiyad, 'Oil in Iraq: Basic Issues, Development and Discourse', *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies*, 2.1 (2010), pp. 155-195; Peter Kandela, 'Stopping Iraq's Brain Drain' *Lancet*, 8872 (1993), p. 671.

¹⁴⁶ Julian Stallabrass has talked about the large amount of international trade in the art market, indicating a global hegemony, which offers a striking parallel with the distribution of financial power. European sales of art accounts for almost half of international sales. *Contemporary Art: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 4 and 125.

¹⁴⁷ Khedairi, *Absent*, p. 198.

¹⁴⁸ Khedairi, *Absent*, p. 199.

¹⁴⁹ This word has been translated from the Arabic word *khayalat* which could also mean imaginations or imaginings. Thus, the marks of the art works drift from the physical world into the realm of memory and imagination.

Covering the marks left behind by the paintings that have disappeared. He covers the walls with the minaret at Samarra, Sarsank, al-Thirthar, Salah al-Din, Haj Imran, and Shaklawā. One empty slot remains on the wall. He takes an image of Habbaniya Lake and hangs it up in that spot¹⁵⁰.

The image of the difference between the two types of visual representation is phenomenal. Where one requires wood, canvas and screws to hold it together, the other is simply held in place by flimsy sticky tape. The disparity in terms of refinement is just as large. Yet looking at the content, both form part of Iraqi culture and heritage. In fact, Iraqi antiquities are being trafficked through the same illegal trade channels that oil and weapons are channeled through.

In this instance, Abu Ghayib is forced to retreat to an even more distant point in time, to find a consoling memory. Giving away part of modern culture and disrupting history signifies a degeneration rather than progression. This mirrors the crippled economy and social progress during the sanctions years of Iraq. The very small act of replacing modern art with cheap photographic imitations of ancient heritage by Abu Ghayib in the novel suggests that memories of the nation are caught between a fictionalised and distant image of an even more distant past, and a present recycled from a closer past.

It is a cruel irony of war that even those who promise to be the gatekeepers of a civilisation's history, such as the character of Abu Ghayib, find themselves caught up in the same mess that their less intelligent and cultivated comrades also find themselves in. The pre-eminent 'primitive' art piece owned by Um Mazin was sold in exchange for food and so does Abu Ghayib also part with, albeit unwillingly, his

¹⁵⁰ Khedairi, *Absent*, p. 199.

collection of art in order to purchase a new, clean colony of bees. Institutional art is reduced to its asset value, with aesthetics put on the shelf in return for basic survival.

Commodities, ensuring survival opposing the contemplation of aesthetic commodities, are described by Dalal in her encounters of the streets of Baghdad. She tells the reader:

After a while we passed by a hall which I remember to be an art gallery. There is no potential for such activities in these times, and so it has become a store that sells alarms and other security equipment.¹⁵¹

The ‘establishment’ of the art gallery has become an unnecessary space of luxury within the context of living under sanctions. The space dedicated to selling art, partly for profit, partly for cultural exchange, is turned into a space ‘that sells alarms and other security equipment’: products that warn humans of danger have become more important than a painting, or a sculpture, which signifies beauty.

The crumbling of the art infrastructure is met with a change in the ‘class’ of people into whose hands art falls. The novel’s most illiterate of characters, Um Mazin, is in possession of a painting, even though we are not sure of the value of the work. It does not seem that Khedairi is making a distinction here between ‘low’ and ‘high’ art, the commentary is rather about the awful conditions that result from war and destitution, leading to the disruption of notions such as ‘curator’ and ‘custodian of culture’:

Um Mazin is unable to pay my aunt’s husband for her quota of honey this month. Instead, as a substitute for the cash, she sends him the only painting from her flat. She had heard from Badriyya what our flat looks like. Abu Ghayib is delighted with the painting of the field that Um Mazin had acquired from a family fallen on

¹⁵¹ Khedairi, *Absent* p. 61.

hard times. She accepted the painting in exchange for reading their coffee cups for a whole year.¹⁵²

As the quotation above demonstrates, during conflict honey and coffee-cup readings become urgent ingredients of survival, providing consolation and a sweet glimpse of hope. The collapse of the institutions which enabled the controlled commodification of art makes room for pre-institutional exchanges of a painting for coffee cup readings, and later for honey. It is a strange and twisted reversal of Pamuk's world, where Nişantaşı housewives have moved from opening fashion boutiques to the burgeoning art galleries in Istanbul.

The passage draws us to an interesting insight about 'high' and 'low' art. When 'high' art is exchanged for commodities, it suggests the demise of art and cultural institutions. There are no functioning institutions to keep the art safe and so they start to circulate in the open market like buttons and seeds¹⁵³. Moreover, Um Mazin's possession of an art work reveals a new set of relations and power structures. In contrast to the 'wealthy'¹⁵⁴ bourgeois of Baghdad that have now moved to the capitals of Europe, women on the peripheries of established modes of cultivation become owners of cultural capital previously reserved solely for the elite.

This sardonic insertion indicates the fundamental change of life conditions, as now the only way to ensure survival is to act flexibly in the archaic market that has come up, which conflates the value of previously treasured luxury goods, such as art and books, with basic commodities, such as honey and vegetables¹⁵⁵. Hence, in a society torn apart by economic devastations, conceptions of luxury come in full play.

¹⁵² Khedairi, *Absent*, p. 130.

¹⁵³ Khedairi, *Absent*, pp. 19; 22.

¹⁵⁴ Khedairi, *Absent*, p. 197.

¹⁵⁵ Khedairi, *Absent*, p. 46.

I should be inferred though that the handling of discarded items is always condoned. In fact reusing common and even used objects is often shameful, both in *Museum* and in the background of *Absent*'s main narrative, such as when second hand clothing is bought in shame¹⁵⁶. In *Absent*, the closest word we get to 'trash' is 'mustahlika', which means 'used' or 'worn out'. But Pamuk uses the term 'çöp' which means rubbish or trash. Could this discrepancy in language usage between the two novels lead us to read in *Absent*'s independent space where Um Ghayib collects things, as housing 'trash' or unwanted items like in the Museum, or is it an independent space of creativity and originality, where Um Ghayib makes objects on her own terms?

A trash museum?

In order to assess whether or not *Absent*'s space may be read in the same terms as the Museum's, we must first come to understand how the notion of a 'trash museum' can be applied, using Kemal's discussions towards the end of *Museum*. Dedicating two chapters solely to objects and museums, the notion of rubbish is to be reevaluated by 'a cultured man from a good family'¹⁵⁷. Kemal also uses the term 'çöp ev[i]'¹⁵⁸, adding:

The owners of the rubbish dens would be objects of ridicule in apartment houses and neighbourhoods, feared as much for their being solitary cranks as for combing trash bins and consorting with junk dealers.¹⁵⁹

Collecting objects from one's personal life is something to be derided and even feared.

¹⁵⁶ Khedairi, *Absent*, p. 30.

¹⁵⁷ Pamuk, *Museum*, p. 692.

¹⁵⁸ Pamuk, '82. Koleksiyoncular', *Masumiyet*, p. 522. Freely translates this as a rubbish den, which doesn't reflect the idea that the rubbish modifies the idea of the home as a clean place of refuge.

¹⁵⁹ Pamuk, *Museum*, p. 694-5.

That their life's work was an embarrassment to be kept secret and hidden, and that beneath it they felt a shame with even deeper roots, I saw in the eyes of my collectors¹⁶⁰.

Collecting is an 'embarrassment' and a 'vice'¹⁶¹. To hold onto objects because of personal memories and as a result hide it from the public, is ridiculed. By agreeing to donate their lifelong collections to Füsün's memory and to the museum, there is also a willingness to finally let go of that shame and to take pride in exposing the commitment to preserve the past. But in order for this to take place, there must be a 'cultured' mediator, someone like Kemal and also Orhan Bey himself, who is also from one of the old, wealthy Istanbul families. Hence the context through which trash becomes a symbol of memory needs power. The Museum thus becomes a shrine to public memory, an institution created communally in memory of the personal self in opposition to the national and private art establishments 'being used as blueprints for future museums'¹⁶². Unlike Abu Ghayib, Kemal and Orhan Bey save the narration of a collectivity by nuancing and complicating its memories.

Thus, the Museum becomes an institution that shows the everyday life of people in Istanbul, without necessarily engaging with the existing state and corporate art institutions of Istanbul. Through 'migratory'¹⁶³ objects, the lives of people and their experiences are honoured and put on a platform, deserving the attention of visitors both from Turkey and outside. It is a history of the individual person, or of a collective of individuals, and not a metahistory of the state. 'Junk' is only worthless if

¹⁶⁰ Pamuk, *Museum*, p. 695.

¹⁶¹ Pamuk, *Museum*, p. 692.

¹⁶² Pamuk, *The Innocence of Objects*, p. 54.

¹⁶³ Pamuk, *Museum*, p. 699.

it is put into a political context which deems it unworthy. Once that same ‘junk’ is put into a different context, its value can change.

On this notion of the everyday, Sonja Windmüller has stated there are three strategies with which trash museums as cultural projects are implemented, and enable an exploration of elemental questions of aesthetics and representation: ‘purgation, consistency, and auratisation’¹⁶⁴: ‘trash museums work on the elimination not only of dirt, stickiness, defect, but of ‘anything that might provoke revulsion and disgust’’,¹⁶⁵.

As will be shown in the next section, the ugliness of the objects that are collected by Um Ghayib incite revulsion by Abu Ghayib and Dalal, but for Um Ghayib there is nothing horrifying in preserving dead bees and skin. In an act opposing the fine art forms of painting and sculpture, her anti-establishment art is a testament to the ability of objects to become witness and part of history.

Of course, it is not simply Abu Ghayib’s skin cells that will evaporate, but even the painting which contains a mask: a work created in order to stand against the test of time with the correct preservation is in a state of disrepair. It is also only at this stage, when it is falling apart, that Um Ghayib would like to find a buyer for it before it is too late. This reading of preservation versus decay is interesting, and one which Windmüller has touched on, although does not sufficiently expand on in her discussion on trash museums. She writes:

In addition to a fuller, material-dependent brightness, metallic objects– as opposed to the trash mode – possess sturdiness and durability, a quality of historicity, and are at the same time, discursively assured. By stressing the age of objects and their

¹⁶⁴ Sonja Windmüller, ‘Trash Museums: Exhibiting In-Between’, in *Trash Culture: Objects and Obsolescence in Cultural Perspective*, ed. by Gillian Pye, and Simone Schroth (Oxford; New York: Peter Lang, 2010), p. 45.

¹⁶⁵ Windmüller, ‘Trash Museums’, p. 47.

function as long time ‘witnesses’, not only an economic but also a museal value is generated.¹⁶⁶

Economic and museal value cannot be awarded to human remains and trash because they do not possess sturdiness and durability: they are physically ahistoric. Ironically however, in the case of Iraq, the conditions of sanctions are causing the decay of the most valuable aspects of historicity for a nation deemed to be the ‘cradle of civilisation’¹⁶⁷. From a disintegrating painting, to abandoned public monuments, to Abu Ghayib’s deteriorating skin cells, Abu Ghayib’s life, paralleling Iraqi culture, is sucked of its life force. The nation is being depleted of its memories of the past, if we are to use Pamuk’s understanding that these objects, no matter how ordinary or valuable, tell stories about our lives.

If the museum space is understood, according to Pamuk’s conceptualisation, to be a space where narratives are told, and the space in this case is speaking of the narrative of the Iraqi nation under sanctions, then these objects are not only witnesses to, but are also becoming victims of the political and economic realities. The memories of the past are drowning in oblivion. But Um Ghayib creates an alternative conception of the nation through her reuse of trash and decaying materials. Future narrations of the nation should be able to remember and witness the ugliness of war, regardless of their economic value. Memories should thus accommodate the ugly too.

Bric-a-brac and individual memories

She responds with a feeble smile while I explain, “I’ll be working in a warehouse. They separate used and worn out items to recycle them. We place the different

¹⁶⁶ Windmüller, ‘Trash Museums’, p. 47.

¹⁶⁷ Khedairi, *Absent*, p. 9.

materials in separate containers. Plastics go into one bin, glass goes into another, metals go somewhere else, cloth is put to one side, wood goes into another bin, and so on.” She nods her head as if she’s giving me her consent.¹⁶⁸

Resistance to the despotism of patriarchal authorities, nationalist metanarratives, global capitalist systems and the banality of the everyday by employing ridiculous, trivial and often strange things and thus memories is what marks Um Ghayib’s independent space. In order to understand how this happens, using Pamuk’s novel *Museum*¹⁶⁹ enables us to better understand triviality in relation to collecting the quotidian and vulgar. Pamuk’s notion of trash, purpose of the museum and construction of the collector-bricoleur will be used to analyse *Absent*’s¹⁷⁰ construction of a counter-collection that is built using organic human and animal matter, recycled items and human skill. Whilst witnessing the destruction of Iraqi canonised ‘high’ artistic infrastructure, art traditions and establishments, during successive wars and sanctions in the novel, the narrative of a woman who collects everyday materials, trash and waste to create her own negotiations of what art constitutes runs as a parallel moral. *Absent* thus explores one man’s fight to withhold the crumbling that is taking place within the walls of the museum institution in Iraq, and explores his wife’s alternative creative mode of artistic expression through quotidian materials.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁸ Khedairi, *Absent*, p. 209.

¹⁶⁹ In order to distinguish between the novel and the architectural building of the actual museum this thesis will henceforth be referring to the novel as *Museum* (italicised), and will refer to the Masumiyet Müzesi Museum as the Museum. I will be referring to the fictional space of *Absent* as an independent creative space.

¹⁷⁰ The word *gha’ib* is in Standard Modern Arabic. Khedairi however uses the colloquial term *ghayib*. I will make reference to the interchange between Standard Modern and Colloquial Iraqi Arabic later in this Chapter.

¹⁷¹ The author regrets to add that as this thesis was in the process of being written, several heritage sites were under threat in Iraq and Syria. UNESCO, ‘The Iraqi Site of Hatra added to the List of World Heritage in Danger’, <<http://whc.unesco.org/en/news/1309>> [accessed July 1 2015].

Museum as such is particularly useful to appreciate the resistance to the destruction of national museums and the creation of an alternative narrative of the people based not on institutionalised modes of expression, but on the humble collections and creative expressions of the marginalised people of Iraq.

As a counter narrative to the hegemony of memories of the old state system discussed in the previous sections, new marginalised memories are created as Um Ghayib makes her own garments with pride. Note the difference between Kemal's attitude towards the wealthy Istanbulite women who imitate European fashions and Abu Ghayib's incompetencies. Despite the privilege associated with Abu Ghayib's collection, eventually it leaks into the international art market through Jordan, whereas Um Ghayib's creations, which reappropriate decayed waste and discarded items, remain in her independent creative space in Iraq.

This creative space is based on 'need'¹⁷² rather than the comfort of class and economic wealth. Through reusing of Abu Ghayib's skin and dead bees, stitching garments is an act of resistance and is a way to dismantle the hegemony of elitism that hinders female artistic development through the patriarchal preservation of the memory of comfort, pleasure and wealth. Unlike Abu Ghayib's efforts to forget about the present and live in the past, Um Ghayib wants to preserve memories of the ugly present realities of sanctions and war in Iraq through the use of everyday, quotidian objects, as well as trash. It is only those objects which have been used by human beings which can act as witnesses to our contemporary global history where objects and stories are always travelling through disrupted time and space. Khedairi's novel thus could be seen to be working against the social structure implicated in Bourdieu's conceptualisation of art collecting practices, and is instead vying for a model of art

¹⁷² Khedairi, *Absent*, p. 30.

collecting based more on Pamuk's urge for museums that distance themselves from elitism and celebrate the everyday and humble.

The museum thus becomes the space where the fictions of the past are questioned, replacing them with current frivolities, like in *Absent*.

Um Ghayib's collection of buttons, corks and other material that can be used for tailoring is an alternative mode of expression, an art form that is often looked down upon in the art world as being of less cultural value. Handcrafts are seen to be precisely that, a craft of the hand, rather than a fine art form. They are unworthy to be accommodated into the house of metanarratives, the museum. Handicrafts as well as recycled items are thrown into a pile deemed to be nothing more than rubbish, bric-a-brac, trash.

In a society which is suffering, there is no space for the consumer marketplace. In times of survival, consumerism is replaced by recycling things, so that even rubbish becomes consumed and reused over and over again. Even fine art cannot escape this cycle. As an alternative to formally established institutions such as the art gallery where art is normally mediated between artist and collector, or artist and museum curator, in a society torn apart by economic destitution, even fine art finds its way to the anarchic market. Paintings are exchanged for more mundane items, so much so, that it becomes indistinguishable for the rubbish that it is exchanged for. Even museums and gallery spaces are metamorphosed into spaces which house relatively immaterial items.

In addition to art institutions having new functions when under sanctions, homes of uneducated characters such as Um Mazin come to 'accommodate' paintings. This is where we first encounter the painting of a field, a theme recurrent in early modern Iraqi paintings. Instead of enjoying the comfort of an institution or collector's

wall, the painting becomes lost in Um Mazin's apartment brimming over with scrap, feathers, bowls, pestles, mortars and other curious objects used for Um Mazin's business of reading coffee cups.

Useful to understanding how institutions are turned on their heads is Sonja Windmüller's argument that

the boundaries between cultural production and discards have been blurred, as have those between their places of representation. Discarded things have been identified as a cultural reservoir with a special validity. In comparison with intentionally enduring works, they contribute to an unintended historical tradition. Trash provides an insight into the unimposing, the banalities and routines of daily life, and thereby can be characterised by a particular 'veracity and authenticity' ['Wahrhaftigkeit and Authentizität'] (Assmann 1996: 107)¹⁷³.

Objects deemed less worthy are used functionally. A teapot does not rest; it is in continual use and thus circulates in the marketplace as an object which does 'manual labour'. Just like trash, everyday objects become windows through which we are able to see the 'routines of everyday life'¹⁷⁴. In *Museum*, The Museum becomes a democratic space, which allows those supposedly mundane objects to have a voice, a space whereby people from all over the world come to acknowledge these objects' and their existence.

Rather than travel so far to see works of fine art, the Museum becomes a place of pilgrimage, in which one pays homage to those ordinary things that we do not normally notice. Value thus becomes subjective and here Pamuk gives value to these objects because of the memory they conjure. If memories of daily life are mental souvenirs from the 'banal' and 'routine' past, and these memories are remembered

¹⁷³ Sonja Windmüller, 'Trash Museums', p. 39.

¹⁷⁴ Sonja Windmüller, 'Trash Museums', p. 39.

through the novel which is an allegory for the nation, then the novel's construction of a museum is also a celebratory effort to bring those routine and discarded objects to the forefront of our experiences of the place in which the daily humdrum memories of the people are being formed.

In *Absent* however, the independent art space becomes more antagonistic and hostile, rather than celebratory, as is the case of Pamuk. Here, there is a struggle between Abu Ghayib's fine art works and the everyday trash that Um Ghayib collects, between memories of the old and memories of the new:

She has a huge number of square, see-through plastic boxes where she keeps her precious buttons. No one is allowed to approach her possessions. Each box has a small sticker indicating its contents. Plastic buttons, wooden buttons, metal buttons. She has an unusual collection of ivory buttons, and another set made out of compressed cork. Sometimes she writes on the box the type of button it contains: teardrop, circular, cuboid, reed. On others she writes in a clear hand the occasion the type of button would suit: wedding, graduation, mourning.¹⁷⁵

They have labels to help us identify their function, but in terms of creating works of beauty, they remain small elements in the larger whole. These small pieces decorate garments that Um Ghayib sews together. She is an artist in her own right and collects in order to reproduce.

Just like Kemal, Um Ghayib takes pride in working with second hand materials and sees that 'need is the mother of invention'¹⁷⁶. Unlike Kemal, Um Ghayib does not collect objects from other collectors, but instead recycles buttons from second-hand clothes, to reuse in her garments. As a result of this difference,

¹⁷⁵ Khedairi, *Absent*, p. 21.

¹⁷⁶ Khedairi, *Absent*, p. 22.

because of Iraqis' pressing basic 'need[s]' which Um Ghayib accommodates, these recycled objects are never referred to as trash.

This indicates the gap in political experiences as reflected in the novels. For secular, Westernised industrialists, or wealthy families of Istanbul, objects without a 'use value' are deemed 'çöp', where 'use value' is taken in Baudrillard's sense to be 'an abstraction [...] of the *system of needs* cloaked in the false evidence of a concrete destination and purpose, an intrinsic finality of goods and products'¹⁷⁷. In Iraq however, even trash becomes valuable. The way in which value is restored in the two contexts is different however. In *Absent* value of objects is restored based on its necessity for human survival. In the case of *The Museum*, the objects have a value because of their relationship to Kemal's personal love affair with Füsün. In comparison, the love affair is a luxury, endowing objects with meaning and value to be displayed. In the context of Iraq, there is no such luxury. Even romance whistles away as each person is to his own amidst the scramble for survival.

If these objects give us a glimpse into the banalities of everyday life, then Khedairi has been successful in showing us that life in Iraq under sanctions is anything but banal and empty. It is a life not only full of misery, hardships and suffering, but also it is a space which witnesses the human instinct to survive by holding onto anything to ensure life.

This survival is necessary in order to avoid humanity's decay, like it is necessary for Abu Ghayib's institutionalised art to bear reference figures in the 'Ruwwad' school, and the sculptures by Mohammad Ghani¹⁷⁸. Um Ghayib does this

¹⁷⁷ Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, p. 131.

¹⁷⁸ Khedairi, *Absent*, p. 81.

‘without offering an elitist or paternalistic representation’¹⁷⁹ of artistic practices. Her independent space acts as an alternative to the crumbling orthodoxical space Abu Ghayib has created around himself using canonical art works by established Iraqi artists. Um Ghayib lives and survives within an adjacent space, stitching and sewing fabrics together and decorating them with recycled items that tell personal narratives of destitution in Iraq. Um Ghayib’s art is neither elitist nor is it paternalistic; the ‘artist’ here is a female who does not exhibit her ‘art’ in large exhibition halls, but rather artfully adorns the female body.

The moral of Um Ghayib’s storyline is in opposition to ‘the Orientalist tendency to essentialise the region’s culture and society as timeless and identical’¹⁸⁰. The narrative of Um Ghayib, in contrast to that of Abu Ghayib, presents a varied and multilayered representation of ways to preserve Iraqi artistic culture and heritage. Neither timeless, as they are rooted in sanctioned-Iraq, nor identical, the art forms and approaches are quite varied.

In using the notion of ‘trash museum’ and Pamuk’s characterisation of Kemal’s efforts, we could argue that sentiments surrounding collecting quotidian objects are similar to an extent. Just like the junk collectors of *Museum*, so are some youth and families of *Absent*’s narrative ashamed of trading in second-hand clothes, and therefore do so at night to hide ‘away from [the] pyring eyes’ of society¹⁸¹.

It is important to note the difference in economic circumstances between the the narratives of the two novels though. Firstly, collecting objects deemed as trash in

¹⁷⁹ Sonja Mejcher-Atassi and John Pedro Schwartz, ‘Challenges and Directions in an Emerging Field of Research’, in *Archives, Museums and Collecting Practices in the Modern Arab World*, ed. by Sonja Mejcher-Atassi (Farnham, England; Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2012), p. 1.

¹⁸⁰ Atassi and Schwartz, ‘Challenges and Directions’, p. 1.

¹⁸¹ Khedairi, *Absent*, p. 22.

Museum is an indication that the collector bears some sort of ‘wound’¹⁸² personally and individually. In *Absent* the wound is nationwide and deeper as it threatens human survival. Shame in the latter case arises from a larger feeling of guilt for the dire economic circumstances of the whole country, which was previously reaping the benefits of an oil-rich economy before the wars with Iran, Kuwait and the subsequent U.S military attacks and sanctions. The wound is one of deep loss of dignity, evoking the reaction of pride, where the images of plenty are still so fresh in the collective memory. Um Ghayib resists this shame by taking pride not only in the recycled and unused, but by going to the extremes in her acts of collecting dead matter.

Beyond trash: Vulgarly: Collecting carcasses, collecting corpses

In *Absent*, aside from collecting art and objects, a most curious collection is Um Ghayib’s assemblage of Abu Ghayib’s skin flakes and dead bees.

¹⁸² Pamuk, *Museum*, p. 692.

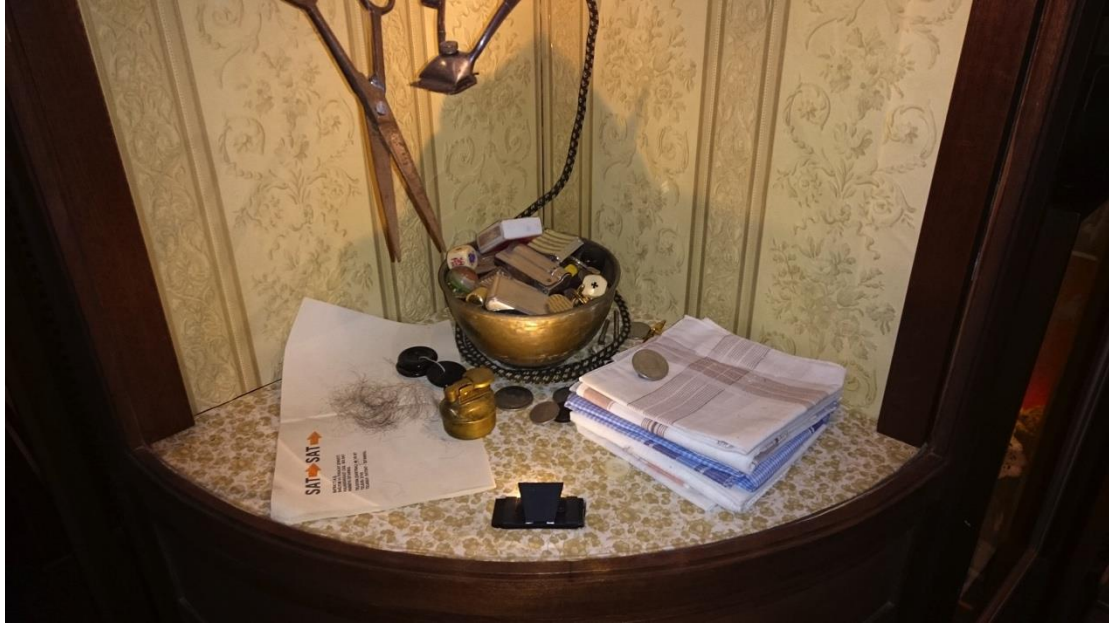


Figure 1.1

Case 19. Belkıs'ın Hikayesi
Masumiyet Müzesi

Photograph taken by author with kind permission from Orhan Pamuk¹⁸³

Collecting objects of immaterial worth, of rubbish, of the worst kind, like dead skin cells, is interesting in the independent space of the Ghayib family's flat, primarily because of its tendency to decay. The water component evaporates, and slowly the skin cells shrink to mere dust. The skin flakes are valuable to Um Ghayib because of their transience. These skin flakes are testament to the destruction of cultural institutions and old political authorities in Iraq. Art is damaged, it gets looted, it finds itself in a building which later will be destroyed. Regardless of value, there is an attack on all forms of life in Iraq; nothing is allowed to persist. Life is reduced to its existential core, which lies in its transience. The value system that exists for Um Ghayib is that temporal objects can also witness history, and therefore also live, and

¹⁸³ Pamuk also displays flocks of Kemal Basmacı's father's hair. The reference to this in the novel is fleeting however. To see this passage, please see Pamuk, *Museum*.

their very withering is as such testament to the experiences within time and place. In other words, *Absent* is a testament to the absence of an authoritative narrative, but for the persistence of life.

Even if art in Iraq is damaged and looted, a narrative can be built out of its absence, as *Absent* shows. In *Absent* there is an active pursuit of ‘adopting (and communicating) museal forms, most relevant among them the classification of objects and the identification of familiar museum sections’¹⁸⁴. Although the latter does not apply to *Absent* as there is no construction of a museum, the classification of objects is indeed there. The apartment of the Ghayib family becomes an independent space, a conservatory of ‘bric-a-brac’, a combination of the vulgar and fine arts. It becomes a depository where every material object is acquired and is weaved into the narrative of Iraq.

Even as she prepares food waste to reuse in her garments, she recycles Abu Ghayib’s paints, which she perceives as part of his futile attempts to create art:

Yesterday she added another box to her collection. She collected some date seeds, dried them and then painted them using Abu Ghayib’s paints. She then placed them on the shelf with a label that said “Fruits”.¹⁸⁵

Dead, decaying material, unused paints, food waste and skin flakes are contrasted with other parts of Um Ghayib’s collection of buttons, beads and thread which takes on a ‘use value’ again in a poverty-stricken society. Just like the timely power cuts every three hours, Abu Ghayib’s skin also is shed regularly, and Um Ghayib creates a hyperbolic contrast between the drying of human skin and the electricity that is

¹⁸⁴ Windmüller, ‘Trash Museums’, p. 49.

¹⁸⁵ Khedairi, *Absent*, p. 117.

lacking in the city¹⁸⁶. Just as electricity is the life and blood of any city, and enables the efficient and smooth running and administration of it, enabling people to go about their daily lives smoothly, supple and hydrated skin is also more comfortable to 'wear'. Thus, the falling skin flakes, paralleled with the power cuts symbolise the effect of human decay as the economic situation eats at human life. As creation is contrasted with decay, so is excess contrasted with necessity: there are so many beads, buttons and thread that Abu Ghayib uses the term 'drowning',¹⁸⁷ to indicate the sheer volume of her collection.

In contrast to Kemal's attitude to the objects, Um Ghayib has no desire to share her collections unless she uses them to revamp old garments. Rather she hoards objects and does not allow anyone to approach 'her possessions',¹⁸⁸. Just like in a museum, there is a strong correlation between the objects and the pride with which curators typically exhibit their museum's acquisitions and loans.

She collected the dead bees that dried out in the sun after they had been anaesthetised. She pulled off their heads and their stingers, and submerged the rest in a preservative mixed with a clear glue. She left the bees' wings attached to their bodies before she mummified them. This gave them an extra sheen. That was how she obtained round balls of synthetic fur that she used to embroider the coats this season.¹⁸⁹

Um Ghayib's real creative juices only start flowing after she feels that her jealous suspicions have been confirmed when Abu Ghayib leaves on a trip. Instead of using her collected buttons, beads and threads, she now takes things to another level, using dead bees to decorate her new coat, and construct a thick fur collar. The process of

¹⁸⁶ Khedairi, *Absent*, p. 22.

¹⁸⁷ Khedairi, *Absent*, p. 22.

¹⁸⁸ Khedairi, *Absent*, p. 21.

¹⁸⁹ Khedairi, *Absent*, p. 149.

drying, separating the head from the body, coating with preservative and finally mummifying the bees to add another furtive layer of sheen, is an intricate and detailed process, described in matching detail in the novel. Unlike Abu Ghayib, whose creativity, on the one hand is limited to the act of collecting rather than producing art, Um Ghayib on the other hand is proactively using her jealousy to expressively and artistically manufacture and design her own coat.

The process of construction is not limited only to recycled objects, but even to decaying materials which can disappear into nothingness if not preserved correctly. Um Ghayib proves her husband wrong, as she is able to do what he has never been able to do: work incessantly and strive hard in her pursuit of original artistic creation.

Her desire to procreate using dead matter does not stop here however.

Later in the novel we are told that she has two additional boxes recently added to her buttons cupboard, where Dalal has found some of Abu Ghayib's *athar*¹⁹⁰. One box is labeled 'Husband 1'¹⁹¹, filled with mummified bees; the second is labeled 'Husband 2'¹⁹², containing Abu Ghayib's skin flakes.

Athar means traces, which could also refer to archaeological heritage or ruins. This ironic pun on the word *athar* constructs Abu Ghayib's skin flakes as archaeological ruins. His identity hinges on absence, the destroyed. Abu Ghayib has become part of that loss of Iraq, where archaeological ruins have either been damaged by bombings or lost to the looting of Iraq's museums and archaeological sites. His sexual impotence, as well as his artistic failures and inabilities, are part of a larger character construct which puts him in the distant past, as a man who is futile and is

¹⁹⁰ Khedairi, *Ghayib*, p. 204. Translated as 'traces' in *Absent*, p. 165.

¹⁹¹ Khedairi, *Absent*, p. 204.

¹⁹² Khedairi, *Absent*, p. 204.

unsuccessful in his enterprise of selling honey, as the bees later are thought to have sucked on corpses' blood.

Throughout the novel, Um Ghayib's relationship with the skin flakes move from disinterest, as she sweeps them from the floor, to pure disgust, to embrace her destiny as she finally starts to collect them. This transition to collecting and preserving the dead and decaying could be an interesting source of comparison with Kemal's collecting of objects. Unlike Kemal, Um Ghayib's act of collecting scales is kept secret, her reason for secrecy probably resembling that of the the Istanbul collectors in Pamuk's novel, and that of Iraqi families trading in second hand clothes: each of them hiding their head in shame.

But the independent creative space which holds recycled bric-a-brac and organic waste is replaced at the end of the novel with Dalal working in a recycling centre, earning Um Ghayib's 'consent'¹⁹³. Recycling objects is not new for her as it is a way to recreate the past as if nothing is lost. There is a comfort she finds in sorting objects, as it is a way of cleaning the nation, of tidying up and organizing their lives from the remnants of the experienced past and present. Dalal's efforts in the recycling centre signifies the will to create new memories.

There is a sad but also pathetically beautiful aspect to working with recycled materials. In a humble retreat to the basic elements of material culture, Dalal is able to appreciate and distinguish materials and types of materials from their textures, weight and odors. In a country where nothing is wasted, in the trash museum there is a democratic appreciation of everything, regardless of brand name, place of production, or material prestige which all carry vestiges of established traditions and hegemonies of values of the past. Everything is thrown into the same trash bin. The recycling

¹⁹³ Khedairi, *Absent*, p. 209.

centre becomes the place where collective identities and collective histories can be traced. It is where people's consumption habits, their life narratives can be found through the objects they have used in their lives. Items from birthdays for example tell a narrative, as do clothes that were purchased for certain occasions, and stitched by certain hands. These narratives are muddled, and Dalal sorts these narratives, arranges them, and therefore fictionalises them. As Windmuller argues, trash has 'fictional potential' which is realised in the trash museum or in independent spaces housing objects deemed to be without a 'use value'. But aside from the 'fictional potential' of trash, the 'consent' that Um Ghayib gives to Dalal to work in the recycling centre is of noted importance, almost as if it is her duty to do so, or as if Dalal is doing what Um Ghayib no longer can do. Thus, the national duty becomes to create new memories using abandoned and valueless objects and to create a new future without the hegemony of tradition.

In Pierre Nora's essay¹⁹⁴ on memory and history, history makes up for the loss of memory, and thus we remember that which is forgotten and collect what is discarded. This is particularly important to the novel. The novel is scattered with objects that are thrown away. Um Ghayib collects things that are designated as rubbish, and Dalal finds herself working in a recycling centre where she must organise the recycled refuse.

To collect deteriorated or discarded objects, an 'anti-monument and anti-museum' needs to be erected. This space's scope is not simply limited to the past, but also includes the present forgetting the past, such as when Abu Ghayib needs to

¹⁹⁴ Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de memoire', *Representations*, 26 (1989), pp. 7-25.

replace contemporary fine art, with cheap imitations of Iraq's ancient Mesopotamian past. His

re-conceptualization of collecting proceeds from a recognition that the full return of the disappeared is impossible, that disappearance remains even when the absent return, that absence is substantive and not merely a notional negative of presence. Collecting the uncanny thus relates to the anti-monument and anti-museum in acknowledging the ultimate irretrievability of the past and recoverability of the missing.¹⁹⁵

Towards the end of the novel, Abu Ghayib is forced to submit to new global pressures, where the past can only be seen through its shadows to make room for new forms of creativity and memories. Thus *Absent* makes us think about daily objects containing microcosms of memory as a form of resistance against not only the hegemony of the powers whose efforts to cripple Saddam Hussein's regime ultimately meant the devastation of the country at large, but also resistance against forgetfulness, against Iraqi experiences and narratives being thrown into the rubble of oblivion. The independent space becomes a place to remember, to hold onto memories of the present, a rallying point against the commercial practices of liberal economies where collecting practices speak to other motives such as the consumption of art as commodity or even worse, for decorative purposes. Rather, the practice of the bricoleur in *Absent* is in recognition of human suffering, and is a statement against the memory of institutionalised and co-opted cultural practices, postcolonial fantasies and nationalist sentiments.

The Bricolage Novel: Writing New Memories

¹⁹⁵ Atassi and Shwartz, 'Challenges and Directions', p. 15.

Having analysed the various forms of hegemony inherent in art which *Absent* deals with, I want to discuss the significance of its form. Literary spaces can be used as an alternative construct of the allegory of the Iraqi nation through an engagement with art institutions, where concrete objects engage with one another to resist the tactics of control employed by the state to manage the nation's memory of its past. As the novel has been argued to be a site for imagining the nation¹⁹⁶, it is the most suitable form to discuss constructions of the official museum where representation of dominant narratives of the nation are contested.¹⁹⁷ Wen-Chin Ouyang demonstrates the relevance of the epistemological and ontological paradigm of the nation-state to readings of the Arabic novel. She argues

the nation-state is the modern prism through which humanity is contemplated afresh, reassessed and reinvented. The past is rewritten in the process, as a part of the re-imagining of community, and history – narratives of the past – comes to be the twin of geography – maps of the nation – and, more importantly, the (hi)story of the nation.¹⁹⁸

It is in the construction of the alternative modes of the museum that the politics of the nation's memory can be poignantly discussed within the space of the novel. Both novels and museums construct and disseminate images of the nation through

¹⁹⁶ Many theorists have noted the importance of novels in the construction of a national imagination. For more, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London; New York: Verso, 1991); *Nation and Narration*, ed. by Homi Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990); Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993). Anne McClintock is one critic of the novel as the primal tool for discussing the nation. For more on her argument see *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (London; New York: Routledge, 1995).

¹⁹⁷ Elliott Colla discusses the relationship between Egyptian literary works of the 1920s and 1930s and the interest in Egyptology. For more, see Elliott Colla, 'Pharaonism after Pharaoh: Mahfouz and Qutb', in *Conflicted Antiquities: Egyptology, Egyptomania, Egyptian Modernity* (Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 234-272.

¹⁹⁸ Ouyang, *Politics of Nostalgia*, p. 145.

memories, myth and resistance to establish ideas about fine art and representational orthodoxies. The institution of the museum is one that has been used by the state to create metanarratives and (invented or real) memories of the nation. In novels, these metanarratives can be subverted and can become the stage of resistance to hegemonic narratives: a space where a colonisation of the nation's memory has been taking place can be subverted into a liberal space where memories chosen and displayed can be reclaimed.

Such alternative memories need authors who, like curators¹⁹⁹, are 'bricoleurs', understanding that all 'signifieds' operate within a closed and finite field of differential signifiers. The novels studied here construct antagonism between objects from 'high' Iraqi culture and 'low' Iraqi culture, and characterise figures within the narrative plot to show this relationship between objects, the way in which they are selected and displayed, and the wider social and political climate which these characters inhabit.

As objects are often used as evidence for memories and the past, the discussion above cannot be understood unless the novel is also read as a contrary effort to show Iraqi life under sanctions through using objects unrelated to national cultural infrastructures, cultural ideals and prevalent artistic styles. In doing so, a counter-allegory of Iraq is imagined which distances memory from the present.

As the nationalist metanarratives are dominated by male narrators, *Absent* employs the 12 year old narrator Dalal, who complicates the pretentious reliability of authoritative narrative structures. Khedairi constructs her facially paralysed. Her physiological abnormality may correspond with the lack of reliability or partiality as

¹⁹⁹ Curators are currently understood as those who work 'in a symbiotic relationship with artists, challenge perceptions and investigate what future culture may be and what it might look like.' George, *The Curator's Handbook*, p. 6.

the mouth is symbolically the organ used to narrate oral tales. Although we are presented with a novel to be read, rather than audio material to be heard, there is a symbolic rendering that Dalal's narrative may not be entirely reliable. In opposition to singular, seemingly accurate representations of the nation-state with its strict gender-roles and hierarchies, Dalal is outside of the system, not just because of her identity as a female and her physical disfiguration, but also because of her status as an orphaned child, without the pretensions of parental ties, and hence roots.

Complicating the irregularities of Dalal's narration, *Absent* toys with a polyphony of voices, and an intricate narrative framework. The direct speech that Dalal inserts adds a slippery, realistic and also dialogic texture to her own musings, self reflections and representations of characters. The plurivocality of the novel intensifies as there are quotations from academic sources and news sources.

The bricolage created is a broken one, not surprisingly considering the turmoil Iraq is in, in the novel and the real world. Unlike in *Museum*, where all the objects testify to the truth-value of Kemal's statement (although the reader knows this is all a fictional tale), in *Absent* there is no real construction of truth, nothing is recorded save in the novel, precisely because everything in Iraq is either sold (like the books that are sold by the metre)²⁰⁰, lost (like the art objects that have to be sold in Jordan)²⁰¹ or damaged (like the painting of the mask)²⁰².

The voices of the novel also reflect this combination of accepted traditions versus popular forms in shifting between Standard Modern Arabic and conversational Iraqi Arabic. At times, characters speak in Standard Modern Arabic, and at other times they shift and speak in conversational Iraqi dialect. I believe that this is to make

²⁰⁰ Khedairi, *Absent*, p. 46.

²⁰¹ Khedairi, *Absent*, p. 245.

²⁰² Khedairi, *Absent*, p. 15.

the characters more realistic and more appropriate to contemporary Iraqi society. Even the title of the novel *Absent* is not Standard Modern Arabic. Instead of the hamza between the *gha'* and the *ba'* (gha'ib), Khedairi has preferred to use the *ya'* (*Ghayib*), giving the title and the novel a more realistic image that is particular to the Iraqi contemporary experience of destitution, sanctions and war.

The structure of the novel and its plurivocality is a formalistic technique or 'poetic' used to tell the story of the chaotic situation of Iraqi life and culture between sanctions and invasion. By accommodating a variety of linguistic and artistic forms, we are told about Um Ghayib's ultimate drowning in oblivion and madness. The novel thus plays with this notion of madness and sanity through the symbolic use of art and culture that can equally be applied to antiquities. Just as heritage is lost and caught up in messy and illicit networks of trade, so does the nation-state disintegrate with people being imprisoned and values being compromised for the sake of survival. The novel's narrative similarly dwindles into a state of ennui as Um Ghayib's previously outgoing personality and vivacity is silenced by madness. The pace of events comes to a halt, as Um Ghayib is lost in reverie and Dalal²⁰³ goes between work at a recycling centre and home.

Just as *bricolage* is 'a complex, dense, reflexive, collage-like creation that represents the researcher's images, understandings and interpretations of the world'²⁰⁴, so is it a hybrid multiplicity of chronotopes, of voices and fictional constructions that engage with actual, real constructions such as the museum.

²⁰³ The name Dalal is significant. In Arabic, the name Dalal means coy and flirtatious. If there is a shadda or stress on the second laam, forming the word *dallal*, the meaning changes to mean guide. The two meanings are significant, but the play on *dallal* is especially relevant as Dalal the character takes the reader around the apartment and 'shows' us in vivid detail all the objects and paintings. The narrator of the novel, thus becomes the curator of the art space. Ironically however, as she flirts with Adel, she becomes a major player in the scheme that traps Abu Ghayib and exposes his plan to send the art collection across the border to Jordan.

²⁰⁴ Denzil and Lincoln in Whiteley, *Junk*, p. xii.

The Museum Space vis-à-vis the Novel: Creating Stories

As shown above, the novel in its very bricolage nature is a literary construction of stories. These same stories can be manifested through objects, and so museums are linked to novels in their communicative ability to narrate. Suzanne MacLeod, Laura Hourston Hanks and Jonathan Hale discuss the power of stories and museums to reveal constructions of ourselves and our world:

Our perception of ourselves and the world around us is structured around stories, then, and this influence of narrative extends into the museum: as a common language for diverse professionals involved in exhibition making; as a means of creating empathetic links between the subjects and audiences of museum displays; and as a glue which plugs temporal, geographical and cultural gaps within the museum. However, narrative is also – as implied above – fundamentally a human construct, necessitating a process of exclusion and editing, with all the risks of bias and distortion.²⁰⁵

In the same way that objects glue ‘temporal, geographical and cultural gaps’, so do the partial narratives, handed down to us through mediated characters, filling in the voids within the novel. Amongst the other functions of the museum mentioned above, the museum creates a narrative, a story, and employs objects, artifacts and antiquities to do so. Similarly a novel creates a narrative using people and objects. In the same vein, the narrator of another Iraqi novel *Sabi‘ Ayyam al-Khalq* tells us ‘the museum

²⁰⁵ *Museum Meaning: Museum Making: Narratives, Architectures, Exhibitions* ed. by Suzanne MacLeod, Laura Hourston Hanks, and Jonathan Hale (Abingdon, Oxon [England]; New York, NY: Routledge: 2012), p. xxii.

and the manuscript are actually two sides of history [...] spatially and temporally',²⁰⁶. The manuscript which informs the novel *Sabi* 'is based on 'confusion and obscurity',²⁰⁷, and throughout it we are constantly reminded of its own fictionality, without a pretense to tell a 'truth'. In relation to *Absent*, we can use this notion of a fictional consciousness to see how Khedairi uses Dalal to play with present realities – be they political, social or economic – without projecting facts. Facts from the real world enter the fictional domain, and are turned into metaphors and objects of other symbolic value in order to creatively critique social affairs, as well as the art of writing.

Museums on the other hand construct a reality. Their physical presence is imposing. Whatever is collected for a museum, and displayed in a museum is irrevocably traced back to the economic, political and social status quo of the 'real' world. What that means, is that the museum is not a space separate from the 'real' world. It is rather a space of conjunction for educational, legal and political establishments.

Connecting this analysis, with that of the personal collection/ museum space of Abu Ghayib, we could say that Abu Ghayib is attempting to build a space where he forgets the need to sell art as a result of destitution. For him building a collection is like trying to build or keep the nation together, but based on an older understanding of the political community whereby heritage still has an important value, rooted within a strict hierarchical order of patriarchy. Abu Ghayib's is a relentless act of gluing objects, creating links. As such they parallel his efforts to glue memories and narratives of the nation. By resisting the hegemonic economic forces which are

²⁰⁶ Abul Khaliq al-Rikabi, *Sabi' Ayyam al-Khalq* (Beirut: Baysan, 2000), p.20.

²⁰⁷ Al-Rikabi, *Sabi'*, p.92.

putting pressure on Iraqis to sell art, Abu Ghayib is constructing his own space, his own narrative, his own story of survival. He wants to give immortality to everything that was part of human excellence and creativity.

The stories which Abu Ghayib wants to preserve are different to those which Dalal and Um Ghayib cling onto. These two characters show us alternative narratives to the memory of glory and plenty. Dalal voices the problem of clinging onto old memories when the political, economic and social conditions of Iraq are undergoing drastic change. Of this she states:

I regretted it. How could I have bought needy people's treasured possessions on the pavements?!²⁰⁸

Unlike Abu Ghayib's fetishisation of the painting he 'purchased' using honey, Dalal wallows in remorse as she exchanges economic value for symbolic value and the books' 'use value' is lost.²⁰⁹ The author of the novel seems acutely aware of the reader's probably exiled and strongly global identity, as a result of war and violence and the further disintegration the nation-state. Such readers are likely to be implicit in the exchange of culture at the expense of Iraqi suffering. The reader might be left questioning how art works one might possess have been acquired, and how ethical this acquisition was in the midst of the political and economic injustices that are part and parcel of the war Iraq has experienced.

So the construction of Aby Ghayib's independent space is a way to project his own desires, fears and memories. As Rachel Morris argues, the defining characteristic of museums is that they are places of 'imagination': there is a magical and 'fantastical'

²⁰⁸ Khedairi, *Absent*, p. 46.

²⁰⁹ These distinctions between different values have been discussed in Jean Baudrillard, 'The Art Auction: Sign Exchange and Sumptuary Value', in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* trans. by Charles Levin (St. Louis, Telos, 1981), pp. 112-122.

quality that challenges the assumption that museums tell 'historical truths'²¹⁰. This tension between fictionality and reality exists in both the novel and the museum itself. As objects are organised, there is a hierarchy created which assembles and unravels a story. This story is often depicted with truth-values. Yet in its very nature, the story, with its labels and dates, struggles to create a reality.

This struggle is also found in written narratives which are destructions and reconstructions of personal and collective memories. The truths of these memories are always unstable, as they are subject to market and audience approval and acceptance. In addition, there is always tension between the verbal and physical objects, both which both have the potentials of accommodating memories. Museums can be 'witness[es] of collective history', memory banks, and spaces of 'fictional potential'²¹¹. Such tensions between the real and the imagined exist in Pamuk's Museum which displays a fictional, personal narrative, but also witnesses the collective history of the people of Istanbul. The Museum is a memory bank for Kemal, but it also crosses paths with the memory banks of earlier generations from Istanbul who witnessed the change to daily life in Istanbul.

Tensions between the real and the imagined take on a different turn in *Absent* as there are several references to superstitious practices. Not only does the mask in the crumbling painting described above see and hear all that takes place in Abu Ghayib's home, so are there several eyes which hang on the walls. The significance of this warder from the evil eye to Middle Eastern cultures is intrinsic to an understanding of its importance in the museum space. Used as a form of protection against evil, the eye

²¹⁰ Rachel Morris, 'Imaginary museums: What mainstream museums can learn from them?', *Midas*, 4 (2014), p. 2-3.

²¹¹ Sonja Windmuller, 'Trash Museums', p. 50.

in the novel is an all-seeing eye that communicates and ‘speaks’²¹² to Dalal. The detail in which the eye is described in the novel is significant: it hangs above the bed, as if it has protective powers. Just as Harris has argued, in novels, these objects and collections have ‘a different power over us’²¹³, which could not be more truly said of the collection in Abu Ghayib’s apartment where Dalal, Abu Ghayib, or even Um Ghayib talk to these objects, acknowledging their presence and power over them.

Contributing to the bricolage is Um Mazin’s coffee readings as she uses ‘phrases and images’ from the coffee dreg patterns to predict a narrative²¹⁴. In Pamukean fashion, this uneducated woman is able to read images that relate to people’s lives. The images are alternatives of the heroic and epic metanarratives of powerful figures, movements and establishments through the sculptures and paintings also described in the novel.

These sculptures were actually created in relation to a larger metanarrative: that of the *Alf Layla wa Layla* set in Medieval Iraq, and has often taken to form part of popular Arabic storytelling²¹⁵. The tension that exists within the magic of the tales, however, is in conflict with the apparent magic of Um Mazin’s coffee cup readings. Both deal with imagery, and with narrative. Whereas the sculptors create monuments from what is presented as popular literature, Um Mazin creates narratives from the images arising from coffee dregs to exhibit the simple, quotidian realities and problems faced by the people. As such, the tension between the authoritative national story of Abu Ghayib finds many forms of resistance in alternative narratives found in

²¹² Khedairi, *Absent*, p. 24.

²¹³ Morris, ‘Imaginary Museums’, p. 4.

²¹⁴ Khedairi, *Absent*, p. 37.

²¹⁵ *Alf Layla wa Layla* has not always enjoyed a part in the literary canon and was instead considered popular and vulgar. See Wen-Chin Ouyang, *Poetics of Love*, pp. 16-17 and Irwin, *Arabian Nights*, pp. 4-5 for more on this.

the novel, which are created by using ordinary objects, through which the lower classes have the opportunity to interpret images on their own terms.

Showing the affinity between novel and museum or independent space, both structures disintegrate. The canonical art works in Abu Ghayib's protection go missing as they are transported to Jordan. Even Um Ghayib becomes mentally ill, and Dalal discovers that her lover was actually a spy for the Iraqi state.

Rather than coming to a neat closure, the novel ends in rupture, as it ends with Dalal trying to teach a young boy to read the Arabic alphabet. Ending with the *alif, ba'* – the first two letters of the Arabic alphabet – the novel's structure ends with (a new) beginning. Even the independent space which housed both canonical works of art and independent creativity of Um Ghayib is turned on its head, as the creativity of Um Ghayib is lost to mental illness. Instead, the only institution to survive is the recycling centre. This collapse of any form of individuality informs us of the dire situation in Iraq. Memories cannot be preserved in a space of creativity, nor one of preservation and educational initiatives with the public, because both are abandoned for basic survival.

This leads us to draw an interesting conclusion about the nature of the independent space in relation to the novel. Concerning the space, Abu Ghayib's collection enjoys the comfort of the fairly serene space of the apartment. Upon reaching desperate measures, the art is lost, and cheap imitations preside in the apartment, as well as other recycled items from Um Ghayib's collections. Like the novel which tells the story of the Ghayib family going from riches to rags, the apartment as a physical though projected space, tells the same narrative. From expensive art works by renowned Iraqi artists, where images engage in a positive sense with our imagination and senses, the reader is left with a description of a barren

space, which is filled with recycled objects, and cheap posters that are hung on the wall using Scotch tape. It is the unheard of tale of Iraqis, of looted heritage, the anti-monument and the ugly truth of war and sanctions

Summary

Absent is a novel that shows multiple forms of opposition, within the larger geopolitical framework of Iraq between two wars and sanctions that shattered the country. The year 2003 marks the end of the novel, with war approaching, which will later result in global financial institutions itching to 'open' Iraq up to a free market economy. This new market hegemony of invisible transactions, has very real consequences for the Iraqi people, which effects how Iraqis try to resist by engaging in different forms of cultural practice. These cultural practices defy the monotony and darkness of life towards the end of the sanction years and at the dawn of another war.

The cultural practices which enable such resistance take on two main, but opposing forms. One form is based on the ideals and memories of Iraqi nationalism, even though the functions of the Iraq state have been in sharp decline since the invasion of 2003. In *Absent*, the canonical art works collected by Abu Ghayib are canonised because of the memories that they hold of a prosperous and strong autonomous state. At the same time these memories are of a state dictated by patriarchal ideals, and dominated by male artists in the prestigious art circles of bourgeoisie Iraqi society. These memories of a bygone age are no longer relevant to oppose the might of global financial hegemonies. As an alternative, Khedairi establishes creative forms practiced by Abu Ghayib's female nemeses, who were silenced during the old nationalist regime. This counter narrative in opposition to i.

the patriarchy and nationalism embodied by Abu Ghayib, and ii) the horrors of sanctions and war brought upon Iraq by global financial institutions²¹⁶. These new female creative production processes and products employ quotidian and vulgar objects

to seek and reclaim the culturally and socially marginal
and the cultural autonomy of the subaltern subject; the
everyday is the site of the ‘voiceless’²¹⁷.

This employment of creativity to produce a counter-narrative is similar to the one Pamuk sets out in his novel *Museum*. Pamuk’s novel allows us to see the progress beyond established national museums as a representational opportunity for subaltern figures to be inserted into memory narratives. Khedairi’s depictions of the boxes of seeds, dead bees, skin flakes and recycled buttons discussed throughout this Chapter is not only an act of reclaiming a space in the house for herself, but is also an act of working against the repression that enabled even figures such as Abu Ghayib to be shunned from the Iraqi art academy. Rather than revel in self-misery and lie in the shadows of an obsolete past, Um Ghayib proactively creates her own locale of creativity based on her personal memories.

These personal memories are thus stories, in the same way as a novel is a construction of different narratives combined into one book form. Such accounts do not exist in the form of words alone, but involve objects too. The objects are also part of these narratives, and have narratives of growth and decay of their own: from their existence as raw materials, through manufactured objects, objects to be sold with an

²¹⁶ See Khedairi, *Absent*, p. 72 for a particularly beautiful description of a painting in light of the U.S. led war against Iraq.

²¹⁷ Roberts, *Philosophizing the Everyday*, p. 121.

economic exchange value, objects which are then used by people and finally things which embody personal memories, and are possibly reappropriated for a new life.

What words and objects have in common is precisely their potential to participate in larger networks of signified tales. They can do so because of their ability to be used in sign systems, which in turn enable them to take on signified meaning. Because of their functional intermediary role between arbitrary and sign system, we can say that words and objects offer the potential of resistance, through creative production, in a country destroyed by war and brought down by the power of capitalist global institutions.

Because objects and words can participate in new processes of signification, they can disrupt hegemonies inherent in language traditions; political authorities which manipulate words and objects to suit their agenda, controlling memories of the past and memory formations of the present. Similarly, they have the potential to disrupt artistic canons which carry over outdated memories of older creative practices, for example in museums.

As words and objects can be used to construct alternative modes of signification, we can say that these alternative forms of signifying meaning are in opposition to older structures. These older structures are dependent on memory for continuous circulation. However, as shown in this Chapter, narrative forms such as the novel appropriate different forms of objects to tell new stories which defy older memories of domination. As such memories become sites of resistance against established hegemonies.

This Part has shown how new memories can be formed through the literary form of the novel and the signification of objects. The following Part will analyse

constructions of memories through words by disassociating them from their signified images in the Palestinian context.

PART II

Dis-membering images and words

Introduction

The previous Part explored Pamuk and Khedairi's opposition to patriarchal and nationalist memories by women in contemporary Iraqi society through objects. The psychological violence against Um Ghayib by Abu Ghayib is based on memories of a nationalist, male, elitist narrative. Khedairi constructs objects in the novel to resist this narrative internalised not only by Abu Ghayib, but also by the state and its institutions, art canons and international flows of capital which through their respective institutions impose singular ways of existing and creating.

The perspective put forward in Part I, will be continued in the Part of my thesis. It enables us to think about the role of the 'memories of place' and the role it hypothetically has in aggravating conflict and difference. We will also move our focus geographically from Iraq (and to a much lesser extent Turkey), to the Palestinian context. Darwish and Sabella's works exhibit a level of resistance to different external influences: co-option by state-acting bodies, Israeli occupation, global financial hegemony and literary myths. Before I come to show how memories buttress the authority of the aforementioned powers I want to begin by briefly outlining the key moments in the history of Palestine from the early years of British rule to the years which contextualise these works (which date 1998-2010).

Historical overview of Palestine's modern history

After the Ottoman decision to join World War I on the side of Germany in 1914, Britain came to rule of Palestine when it seized Jerusalem in 1917. In 1920, the League of Nations appointed Britain mandatory power of Palestine, while the Mandate government followed shortly in 1922 and was brought into effect in 1923. Diplomatic efforts to oppose the Balfour Declaration of 1917, which granted rights to the Zionist lobby in Britain to eventually establish a Jewish state in Palestine, were made between the years 1922 and 1936. Organised local resistance began in 1920, eventually leading up to the Arab Revolt (1936-38).

The British Mandate began to come to an end after World War II in November 1945, with the British finally leaving Palestine in May 1948 when the State of Israel was created on 13th May 1948²¹⁸. Two days after, the states of the Arab League entered Palestine, claiming to do so in order to protect the Arab population from atrocities. After this, the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) began to seize more Palestinian territories.

The IDF occupied the Sinai leading to the 1956 Suez Crisis and Britain and France moved in to occupy Egypt. After increased pressure from Soviet Russia and the U.S. all three occupiers were forced to withdraw, despite Israel continuing its free navigation through the Straits of Tiran. Because an effective strategy for peace had not been established, the events of 1956 enabled Israel to strengthen its military forces, resulting in increasingly authoritarian powers granted to military leaders including the

²¹⁸ *Britain, Palestine, and Empire: The Mandate Years*, ed. by Rory Miller (London: Routledge, 2016).

rights for military governors to expel local populations, through unsubstantiated arrest and without access to a fair trial for those involved.²¹⁹

Eventually this led to the 1967 Six Day War when the Egyptian military mobilised to retake the Sinai Peninsula. Even though defeated, Egypt encouraged Syria and Jordan to attack Israel. Israel responded by occupying the West Bank from Jordan and the Golan Heights from Syria. In the October War of 1973 both Egypt and Syria launched attacks into the Israeli controlled areas of the Golan Heights and the Suez Canal. After appealing to the U.S. for military assistance, which was granted, Israel began pushing back both the Egyptians and Syrians, fortifying Israeli control of these two areas.²²⁰

The outcome of the War being unfavourable to both the Arab states and Israel, encouraged them both to participate in the Camp David Accords of 1979 which included the withdrawal of Israel from the Sinai. After increasing violence between Palestinians outside of Palestine/Israel, in places such as Lebanon and Jordan, the PLO decided to settle for an armistice agreement, which we know today as the Oslo Accords of 1993. These Accords however failed to achieve any real peace between the two parties. Darwish, who I will discuss in the first Chapter of this Part, had been a prominent member of the PLO, but when a real peace settlement between the PLO and Israel failed to materialise he resigned from the PLO.

Despite the Israeli state stating its withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, its airspace, waters and movement of peoples and goods remain under Israeli surveillance and control. As early as 1994, when the Paris Protocols continued economic negotiations

²¹⁹ Ilan Pappé, 'Revisiting 1967: The False Paradigm of Peace, Partition, and Parity', in *The Oslo Accords: 1993-2013: A Critical Assessment* ed. by Petter Bauck and Mohammed Omer (New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2013), pp.13-28.

²²⁰ For more on the October War see Kenneth W. Stein, *Heroic Diplomacy: Sadat, Kissinger, Carter, Begin, and the Quest for Arab-Israeli Peace* (London; New York: Routledge, 1999).

between the Palestinian acting government and Israel, economic inequalities remained: Palestinians would be able to work in Israeli manufacturing and Israel in received the largest share of revenues generated from import taxes. The agreements negotiated in Paris however did not always come to fruition, and the Israeli government reduced the quota of Palestinians what could work in Israel. Unemployment in the Palestinian territories rose, with international aid focused on maintaining a sufficient standard of living rather than robust development.

While this was happening, Israel began to enter into several economic agreements with the Arab Gulf states and Morocco. The Oslo Accords therefore served not only the promotion of trade between the Israelis and Palestinians, but also helped to facilitate the end of the Arab boycott of Israel. This in turn led to multinational corporations opening branches in Israel including Kimberly Clark, Nestlé, Unilever, Procter & Gamble, McDonald's, Burger King, British Gas, Volkswagen, Generali, while banks like Citigroup, Lehman Brothers, HSBC, Bank of America and Chase Manhattan also set up shop in Israel.²²¹

Agreements such as Oslo were only useful as long as they allowed for Israel to be open to the global free market economy and foreign investments. Here we can see how the drive to participate in the global economy necessitates the participation of the local populace, not as individuals but as members of an 'imagined totality'. Such compartmentalisation of peoples enabled a more efficient economic strategy in Israel.

But while benefiting the Israeli economy, it came to the detriment of the Palestinian peoples. With unemployment increasing and the standard of living

²²¹ Jonathan Nitzan and Shimshon Bichler, 'From Foreign Investors to Transnational Ownership', in *The Global Political Economy of Israel: From War Profits to Peace Dividends* (London; Virginia: Pluto Press, 2002), pp. 337. For more on Israel's economic policy towards Palestine see Arie Arnon, 'Israeli Policy Towards the Occupied Palestinian Territories: The Economic Dimension, 1967-2007', *Middle East Journal*, 61.4 (2007), pp. 573-595.

decaying, daily civil unrest emerged in 2000, known as the Second Intifada, and lasted until 2005. In addition to this, the internal political struggles between Fatah and Hamas in 2007 erupted into violent conflict, with Hamas emerging victorious and controlling the entire Gaza Strip. As Hamas did not accept Israel's right to exist, Israel blocked the Gaza Strip's waterways, while Egypt blocked Gaza's land borders. The violence did not cease with these blockades however and in late 2008 Israel launched an organised offensive against Gaza with heavy damage done to human life and infrastructure.

Darwish and Sabella's work and Palestine

Writing and photographing in an environment where the struggle over the appropriation and control of land, natural resources and peoples, form important aspects of the works by Darwish and Sabella studied here, and cannot be reduced to the realm of a mere context. Moreover, the struggle for national autonomy and global recognition has created new forms of oppression which I will discuss below, and then relate to each of the cases to be studied.

The struggle over land has involved the additional battle over cultural institutions which narrate stories of its history. Just as has been discussed in Chapter I, the museum is one kind of cultural institution which valorises official history. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that in 1948, after Israel was created, museums, schools, libraries, books, private papers, historical manuscripts, archival papers, churches, mosques and residential areas were appropriated by the Israeli

state in order to solidify its control over the newly occupied territory and peoples.²²² What became clear was that this was not simply a conflict over the land, its peoples and resources, as I have discussed above, but also a conflict over representation. These representations relied heavily on personal and collective memories which had been consolidated and affirmed through the social institutions and cultural materials mentioned above. In retaliation to the Israeli state's consolidation mission, members of the Palestinian authorities, including the PLO needed counter-narratives, using cultural materials and symbols to affirm Palestinian's right to the land.

Writing or photographing to represent a larger communal identity becomes what Biodun Jeyifo calls a nationalist or culturalist 'proleptic designation'.²²³ Aware of his abilities to attract large crowds and to articulate the precise wounds of the larger Palestinian predicament, especially after his seminal poem 'Identity Card', Darwish's work got such a 'proleptic designation'. He was used by the PLO, even writing speeches for Yasser Arafat. Being used as a mouthpiece for the PLO became problematic for Darwish, as he didn't want his poetry to be determined by the self-serving interests of national politics. To him this form of authority became oppressive, and something to resist in addition to the ongoing presence of the Israeli state.

The literary value of Darwish's poetry as it benefited the state-building project of the PLO, and especially its struggle for recognition as an autonomous state, became effectively intertwined with the hegemonies of Arabic literature, which I will discuss in Chapter II. Taking canonised models of literary language and symbols became a prerequisite for its circulation amongst Palestinian literary circles, as these symbols

²²² Nur Masalha, *Palestine Nakba: Decolonising History, Narrating the Subaltern, Reclaiming Memory* (London: Zed, 2012), p. 135.

²²³ Biodun Jeyifo quoted in Brouillette, *Postcolonial Writers*, p. 8.

formed the basis of appropriating culture against the new censorship of the Israeli state.

Therefore, we can say that the hegemony of Arabic literature, the Palestinian cause and Darwish's role in it, do not exist individually, but are rather interconnected. Through reading Darwish's poetic language, and Sabella's visual language we can see that they both oppose the oppression and violence of the Israeli state, and the new hegemony of the Israeli's state's political opposition, which imposes its own modes of oppression onto creative imagining through the manipulation of memories of place.

These memories of place haunt Darwish and Sabella's image-making oeuvre, *creating* sites of struggles of representation, but also *created* by the conditions of the Palestinian struggle. The Palestinian is to imagine its 'totality' by state-acting bodies, such as the PLO and PA. Its 'imagined totality' is mirrored by memories handed down through literary myths, scriptural texts and archived photographs and images. These memories thus circulate by different means and media.

This Part will discuss the challenging articulations of place and existence through complex interplays with memory in Darwish's poetry and Sabella's photography. Multiple hegemonies have come to regulate how Palestinians should think about themselves, live and behave as well as how they should be viewed by the outside world. These established discourses have been configured as sources of orthodoxy which hinder the freedom of individual identity and the freedom of artistic expression, and in doing so, determine key memories in formulating established orthodoxies:

nationalist cultural forms, from the poetry of Mahmoud Darwish [...] to visual arts [...] have helped form these

narratives [of memory] producing what Hammer calls a “canonization” of some stories and symbols²²⁴

I would add that both Darwish and Sabella are aware of their own power to participate in the process of canonisation, and start to create a space within their work to decanonise and depopularise nationalist cultural stories and symbols,²²⁵ for one by turning specific geographic entities into ambiguously universal spaces which continuously shift between their identity as ‘Palestinians’ and ‘the refusal of an easy political categorisation’²²⁶.

This is done through complications in the relationship between the signifier and the signified of images and words found in literary and visual established traditions and political hegemonies in the Palestinian context. In order to show this interplay between semiotic structures, I will analyse the symbolic structures in the treatment of the Palestinian landscape, in the photography of Sabella, through a theory derived from Darwish’s poetry. Darwish’s poetry will act as a theoretical entrance way through which we will get a richer understanding of the visual image in Palestinian photography, and the significance of deconstructing concretised and dogmatic images of the Palestinian landscape.

Both Darwish and Sabella are critical of both official Israeli and Palestinian discourses that have constructed monolithic images of Palestinians and their experiences for their own gains at the expense of the occupied peoples. These homogenous images are then used to determine how Palestinians should think, live

²²⁴ Ahmad H. Sa’di and Lila Abu-Lughod, ‘The Claims of Memory’, in *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 7.

²²⁵ Brouillette has done detailed analysis on postcolonial writers responding to market pressures and processes of canonization in her study *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace*. Just like her analysis of J. M. Coetzee and Zulfikar Ghose shows, both Darwish and Sabella are functioning in response to audience’s requests to show opposition to Israeli occupation, but also ambiguous with relation to notions of regional and biographical positioning. See pp. 112-173.

²²⁶ Brouillette, *Postcolonial Writers*, p. 147.

and behave, as well as how they should be viewed and responded to. As these articulations are established, they have become sources of hegemony for both the individual identity of Palestinians and of creative expression more generally.

Thus Chapter 2 will begin first by discussing the development of Darwish as a poet, analysing key poems and interviews, in order to show how the various hegemonies I have discussed above have influenced his writings. These establishments are divided into three sections for discussion. The first section explores memories of the past in the form of scriptural narratives which are employed to legitimatise Israeli occupation – intertwined with perspectives on global economic oppression in relation to Palestinian existence. The second section relates to various discourses on Palestine and Palestinian identity, which necessitate the need for a national canon and a national poet. The third section moves on to discuss how the ‘traditions’ of contemporary Palestinian poetry, which are in turn inherited from modernist poetics (particularly the revival of the Tammuzi myth) are opposed by Darwish.

I will then theorise the image from three of his later works *Sarir al-Ghariba* (The Stranger’s Bed, 1998), *Halat Hisar* (A State of Siege, 2002) and *La Ta’tadhir ‘Amma Fa’alt* (Don’t Apologise For What You Have Done, 2003). I will look at how Darwish tries to dislocate symbols in free-verse 1940s and 1950s Modern Arabic poetry as well as his previous literary images of Palestine from scriptural and literary myths of the landscape, in the latter half of his career. His new images of Palestine steer away from nationalist and political hegemonies of both the Israeli state and occupation, and Palestinian nationalism, both dependant on memories of ‘imagined totalities’.

Through his poetic efforts to dismantle the various poetic, literary and political orthodoxies and establishments, I argue that Darwish is calling for a return to the fundamental human experience of living and being that is necessarily grounded in the quotidian. His poetry of the first decade of the twentieth century demonstrates a more complex engagement with image making, writing poetry and the wider usage of poetry in public discourse. I read Darwish's later works as a body of poetry that challenges i. political epistemes and ii) constructions of the Palestinian land.

Darwish's poetry enables us to think not simply about political oppression and the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands, but could be read to have theoretical as well. His deconstruction of older poetic traditions that discuss the Palestinian land is done in order to create a new poetic-space and as such a new relationship between poetry and the land is established. This new relationship is entrenched in Darwish's aspiration for the Palestinian people to be free from the Israeli occupation, international financial institutions' conditionalities, and to be able to live a trivial life, without constantly thinking about the political injustices against humanity that suppress creativity.

This is the crux of Darwish's nuanced play with imagery. As an effect of Palestine still being under occupation, there are still political and historical references to be found in his poetry. Despite this, he is aware of the limitations this imposes on the poet's ability to create and imagine a new concept of space. Thus, his poetry could be seen to be a struggle to move away from the serious subjects of oppression, violence and death, to the right to enjoy the trivialities of life through the humdrum and commonplace, similar to Khedairi's fictional character Um Ghayib, but with a different approach to memories.

In light of approaches to image building of the Palestinian landscape that Darwish theorised in his poetry, I analyse photographs from Sabella's three works: *Search* (1997), *Identity* (2002) and *Settlement: Six Israelis and One Palestinian*²²⁷ (2008/2010). The first two works are attempts to depopulate photographic images of the Palestinian landscape, monopolised by historical sources such as Orientalist photography, family albums and media images, all forms of hegemonic structures controlling our imagination and perception of Palestine.

The latter work continues the same theme of purging the photographic image of discourses that have imposed a singular vision of the Palestinian landscape, but related to the mythology of the image of the Palestinian (which is constructed against the 'other' Israeli), Sabella asserts his right to create images of individual human bodies, divorced from visual articulations that determine how we should think about human subjectivity.

Defining image, imagery and photography

Photograph means 'writing with light'²²⁸ and in Arabic, *al-sura al-fotografiyya*, it becomes a compound whereby an adjective is appended to the term *sura*, picture or image. The Arabic term for photograph as such steers away from cultural hierarchy.

According to M. H. Abrams in *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, imagery signifies a "“mental picture”", 'a picture made out of words', and that a 'poem may itself be an image composed of a multiplicity of images'.²²⁹ Imagery sets to make poetry more *real*, more *imaginable*. 'Imagery' in this usage includes not only visual

²²⁷ Henceforth referred to as *Settlement*.

²²⁸ Online Etymology Dictionary. 'Photograph' was used first in 1839 by Sir John Herschel.

²²⁹ Cecil Day Lewis, *The Poetic Image* (SI: Cape, 1947), pp. 17-8.

sensory qualities, but also qualities that are auditory, tactile (touch), thermal (heat and cold), olfactory (smell), gustatory (taste), and kinaesthetic (sensations of movement).²³⁰

²³⁰ M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, Seventh Edition (Heinle and Heinle, Thomson Learning, 1999), p. 121

2

DARWISH: DISCOURSES ON PALESTINE, PALESTINIAN EXISTENCE AND THE ISRAELI OCCUPATION

The Oppression of Occupation, the Occupation with Oppression

The village of his birth in 1941, being destroyed and occupied by the Israeli forces in 1947, one of the main sources of oppression, when Darwish began writing poetry in the 1960s was the Israeli occupation. This occupation created many injustices and divided the Palestinian society, and made it have to rely heavily on foreign aid.

Despite this, Darwish tells us that political concerns should not suffocate the poetic voice, and be allowed to colonise the imagination so that poetry cannot contemplate other-worldly concerns and issues. Rather, poetry must use the present condition to make projections about the metaphysical and intangible. Darwish's poetry is filled with this complexity of trying to 'liberate the poetic self' from the Israeli occupation and transcend it, but constantly finds that the aggression, immediacy and constancy of it cannot be ignored. His language is filled with references to the Israeli colonial project, but is also clustered with language relating to nature, love, death, the self and the soul.

The Palestinian writer used to be unable to write about metaphysical subjects love and death – because there were more pressing issues: oppression, occupation, resistance and liberation.²³¹

²³¹ Mahmoud Darwish, Reja Shahadeh, p. 58.

The preoccupation with occupation was a siege in itself. The politics of the day were pressing themselves on poetic creativity so much so that it was made incumbent for the poet to write about the atrocities of war and conflict. As a poet, Darwish felt pressured into writing about the oppressing Israeli occupation, making his own existence only necessary in order to voice the collective Palestinian need for liberation. This was to become problematic because he felt that the human side of him, which wished to explore metaphysical subjects beyond the realm of identity and geopolitics, was being overshadowed and contained by the pressing demands of his audience.

Liberation for Darwish therefore is not only liberation of the land, but also liberation of the self from the personal and inspirational siege that the political siege has inadvertently created; it is as if the atrocities of occupation have meant that the poet should feel guilty to love, to think about death. Darwish didn't want to allow for his existence and writings to be occupied by issues which go beyond the immediate need to liberate the land:

I also wrote [*Halat Hisar*] *Stage of Siege*, which is a poet's journal that deals with resisting the occupation through searching for beauty in poetics and beauty in nature. It was a way of resisting military violence through poetry. The victory of the permanent, the everlasting, the eternal, over the siege and the violence.²³²

Through serenely looking at the natural environment and exploring beauty in poetics, the horror of war and violence is resisted. As Darwish has previously mentioned, this resistance does not have the power to instigate change in the political arena, but is a way of asserting the self and the right for beauty and life to be celebrated, something which violence attempts to destroy. Through the destruction of

²³² Darwish, *Shehadeh*, p. 59

buildings and the plundering of cultural institutions such as the Palestinian archive centre in Beirut which was destroyed during the Israeli invasion of 1985, any form of cultural autonomy from Israel has come under attack. This military violence, although it cannot be stopped in reality, can be resisted through poetry.

In this light it would be erroneous to argue that Darwish was constantly striving to resist the political oppression until the last lines of poetry he wrote. In fact, during the late 1990s and early 2000s, Darwish began to see that a return home would always be problematic, even if simply a metaphorical return that would come about through his writing.

Moving away from the communal notions of the Palestinian community as living in exile from the homeland, or as living in a lost homeland, Darwish began to write deeply personal articulations of his own exile, as it was not simply an exile conditioned by the Israeli occupation, but one of (self-chosen) exile to be liberated from the literary and scriptural myths that had taken command over his poetic constructions throughout his career. These myths were transformed into potent memory sites with the Israeli occupation. In creating his own metaphors and poetic images, without being oppressed by the shadows of history, he was carving out his own 'lived metaphor of writing'²³³ for himself.

His 'lived metaphor' became a way of resisting the appropriation of myths and memories of Palestine by the official anti-Israeli occupation body, the PLO. Because the PLO created its own reasons for Palestinian existence based on difference, exclusion and binary opposition through memories regurgitated in literature,

²³³ Charlotta Salmi, 'A Necessary Forgetfulness of the Memory of Place', *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 14.1 (2012), p. 65.

Darwish's early literature, which used religious and literary symbols, became useful and later celebrated as the mouthpiece for the Palestinian struggle.

Co-option by the PLO and Darwish's canonisation

When asked about his celebrity status as the poet of the Palestinian resistance movement, Darwish states

لا أستطيع أن أقبل بأن أعرف بأنني شاعر القضية الفلسطينية فقط، وبأن
يُدرج شعري في سياق الكلام عن القضية فقط وكأنني مؤرخ بالشعر لهذه
القضية²³⁴.

I cannot accept to be designated as only the poet of the Palestinian Cause, and that my poetry is only read in the light of discourses on the Cause, as if I am historicising the Cause through poetry.

Here Darwish refuses to be labelled as a poet solely of the Palestinian cause. He positions himself against being used for collective memory purposes. Of course this is ultimately out of his control. Nevertheless Darwish was aware of how his poetry was being used by the Palestinian authorities to create a counter-narrative to the prevailing hegemony of the Israeli occupation. Growing increasingly critical of this, Darwish began to write poetry that strongly questioned the role of his poetry had taken to serve political ends. Through an engagement with his own metaphors and imagery, he worked straddled between the concrete metaphors of mythical narratives, and his personal desire to have the freedom to celebrate the everyday.

In light of this, we can understand better how the role of the national poet has imprisoned him. The 'prison' being what he considers as a construction of a new kind

²³⁴ Darwish, Interview with 'Abdu Wazzan in 'Abdu Wazzan, *Mahmud Darwish: Al-Gharib Yaq'a'u 'Ala Nafsu: Qira'a fi A'malihi-l-Jadida* (Beirut: Riad al-Rayyis Books, 2006), p. 69.

of literary tradition that requires of Palestinian poets to remain loyal to the Palestinian cultural resistance movement against the Israeli occupation.²³⁵ His early career was dominated by Pan Arab discourses reflecting on his early life in Israel as a ‘present-absentee’²³⁶, not returning early enough to be recognised as an Israeli Arab. This discourse helped to forge a strong resonance in the hearts of Arab poets and masses, where the idealistic cry for Arab unity ‘demand[ed] for a strong moral relationship between the people and their rulers’²³⁷.

Later on this then became a source of power struggle between himself as a poet and the Palestinian political situation, where he felt pressured to write poetry about oppression and occupation, through a poetic manipulation of memories. In 1961 Darwish joined the Israeli Communist party, Rakah, and edited its newspaper. Of his own political career he says in an interview:

“I became close to the Israeli Communist Party. This introduced me to the notion that poetry can be an instrument of change. I took this very seriously until I arrived at my own conclusion that poetry changes nothing. It may have an effect on how people feel, but it has no effect on reality [...] the more seriously my poetry is taken, the more worried I become about the future.”²³⁸

²³⁵ This is evident even in scholarly writings from the Arab world on Darwish. His writings are often seen to be a ‘guide’, which Darwish was far from happy with. For more on such a reverence, see Tahrir Hamdi, ‘Yeats’s Ireland, Darwish’s Palestine: The National in the Personal, Mystical, and Mythological’, *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 36.2 (2014), pp. 92 – 106. Even David J. Wasserstein refers to Darwish as ‘the voice of the Palestinian people’. See David J. Wasserstein, ‘Prince of Poets: Mahmoud Darwish was the voice of the Palestinian people – chronicling not just the struggles and political injustices but also the rhythms of daily life’, *American Scholar*, 8.4 (2012), pp. 111-117.

²³⁶ According to Israeli Absentees’ Property Law of 1950, an ‘absentee’ refers to a person who left Palestine before or during the date when the Israeli state was created, but who is now currently internally displaced within the Israeli state. These present-absentees are the Arabs who left Palestine before the proclamation of the Israeli state. For more on citizens’ rights in Israel see Uri Davis, *Apartheid Israel: Possibilities for the Struggle Within* (London: Zed, 2003).

²³⁷ Bassam K. Frangieh, ‘Modern Arabic Poetry: Vision and Reality’, in *Mahmoud Darwish, Exile’s Poet: Critical Essays*, ed. by Hala Khamis Nassar and Najat Rahman (Massachusetts: Olive Branch Press, 2008), p. 14.

²³⁸ Mahmoud Darwish, in Raja Shehadeh, ‘Mahmoud Darwish’, *BOMB* (2002), p. 56.

Darwish has never failed to voice his political opposition to the Israeli occupation, using his poetical feats to challenge and resist the state discourse surrounding the Palestinian-Israeli crisis. Despite his own personal commitment to poetically contemplate the injustices done to humanity by the Israeli state, Darwish was very concerned about how his poetry could become an established tradition in its own right, and how his poetry had played

a crucial role in reinforcing collective identity and the creation of national mythologies. [His] poems [of] collective suffering of its people are lyrically transformed into indomitable archetypes.²³⁹

By taking the power of his poetry seriously, Darwish became wary of his status in the media as a spokesperson for the Palestinian cause, which immediately set him up in the higher ranks of representing a nation, and moving from poet to prophet or leader of the nation through cultural commitment. Now he was unduly faced with the nationalist efforts to canonise his own poetry within literary circles, monopolised by the political establishment within the Palestinian authorities, creating new impressions of the landscape, but using the same fossilised literary images.

Edward Said very succinctly summarises Darwish's relationship with the Palestinian political elite. Of this subject, Said writes: Darwish's

immense prestige as a poet made him politically invaluable, and his intimate knowledge of Israeli life and society was also useful to the P.L.O. leadership. But his uneasiness with organised politics never left him and indeed intensified in the late '80s. He would often watch as the deftly eloquent speeches he wrote for Arafat were rendered deliberately obfuscatory and turgid by organization men and by Arafat himself. His vision of politics was at the same time tragic and

²³⁹ Sa'id and Abu-Lughod, *Nakba*, p. 278, f.n. 4.

Swiftian, and it was not surprising that he resigned from the P.L.O's Executive Committee to protest the signing of the Oslo Declaration of Principles with Israel in the fall of 1993. His extremely harsh remarks to Arafat and the others were leaked to the press and published throughout Israel and the Arab world: "You are dead," he effectively told them. On another occasion Arafat complained that the Palestinians were "an ungrateful people." "Find yourself another people then," Darwish angrily responded.²⁴⁰

An awareness of how the hegemony of the PLO leadership controlled and directed the corpus of poetry Darwish was creating stifled him. Fiercely independent, he could not allow the authoritative political leadership to manipulate the memories of the past to control his creative freedom. Thus, the sources of hegemony for Darwish did not only constitute the oppression of the Israeli state, but also the establishment of the PLO which manipulated his poetic genius to suit their own political ends.

What was set to mark him out amongst Palestinian leaders were his first collections of poetry *'Awraq al-zaytun (Olive Leaves, 1964)* and *'Ashiq min Filistin (Lover from Palestine, 1966)*, labeling him a resistance poet who reaffirmed Palestinian existence. As this period of his poetry was heavily dominated by imagery from Biblical narratives and literary traditions – such as Palestine as a metaphor for Jesus Christ – the Palestinian political authorities used his poetry to forge a new national canon and literary tradition (despite the fact that Palestine was not technically a nation-state).

Probably the most famous of these poems – which was to have a pivotal role in mobilising the masses against Israeli occupation – was 'Identity Card'. Darwish penned this poem when he was only 22 and caused his house arrest in 1967 after it had been reappropriated into a protest song. The poem – with its affinity for the

²⁴⁰ Edward Said, 'On Mahmoud Darwish', *Grand Street*, 48 (1994), pp. 112-3.

Arabic literary tradition of writing about the land, as well as its appeal to memories of older paradigms found in Arabic literature – thus became a source for the new political establishment of Palestinian nationalism.

Paradigms of the past: the Arabic literary canon and Darwish's early poetry

The way in which Darwish's poetry interrogates the hegemony and epistemological paradigms of canonical poets taught at schools and forming the Arabic canon, will be discussed next. In the examples that I will discuss, Darwish explores the images and concepts relating to the landscape and the self. His relationship with the land is both an emotional one, but also one intricately bound to various epistemological paradigms, including religious paradigms narrated through religious texts, political paradigms of the lived experience of occupation, and the literary traditions of Modern Arabic poetry. His poetry questions these paradigms.. Using imagery to describe the landscape, a poetic form which may have been part of the traditional poetry of his early career, later he came to increasingly deconstruct these works.

Despite Darwish's struggle against the recurrent motifs and symbols used in Arab modernist poetry and the memories of those poetic movements created in the Arab world through the process of canonisation, ironically, Darwish's poems were used to create a new aesthetic canon of traditions and symbols.²⁴¹ As such in his later

²⁴¹ It would be limiting to suggest that it was only in the poetic and photographic fields of cultural production that there was a struggle for hegemony. Rather, all cultural fields became a symbolic capital over which there was a fight over ownership. Nicholas Rowe in his article 'Dance and Political Credibility: The Appropriation of Dabkeh by Zionism, Pan-Arabism, and Palestinian Nationalism' in *Middle East Journal*, 65.3 (2011), pp. 363 – 380, shows how the dabkeh dance form became a site of struggle where each group appropriated and invented it as part of their cultural ownership to create an imagined community. A collective identity can thus be constructed and deconstructed using various

work, Darwish thus struggled against a third hegemony, that of the canonic tradition that was created around his own work.

Part of wider colonial practices of translating European literary texts into Arabic, writers from the Arab world during the middle of the twentieth century began to be exposed to new forms of myth-making. Although ancient Mesopotamian myths such as those of Bal, Ishtar and Tammuz, and Judeo-Christian narratives continued to influence poets of the 1940s, a new modernist European influence, found its way into the Arab literary and poetic worlds, and were foundational for Arabic literary journals such as *Shi'r* (1957-1964).²⁴²

Most prominent amongst these sources of European influence was T. S. Eliot's (1888 – 1965) *The Wasteland* (1922), as well as Adunis' (1930 -) *Qasida ila Nyu York* (1971). Bader Shaker al-Sayyab's poetry, reflexive of a wider cultural movement for innovation, was also impacted by Modern English poetry. This is evident in poems such as *al-Mumis al-'Amya* (1954) and *Unshudat al-Matar* (1960). Through his revolutionary use of metre and rhyme, his new and fresh reconstructions of metaphors imported from a range of mythical and religious traditions, he was able to write poetry that challenged the epistemes of poetry dominant in the Arab literary world during the 1950s and 1960s.²⁴³

cultural forms, and not just through poetic and photographic images. Another example for the need to rewrite and reappropriated cultural symbols by the Zionist movement is food. 'With the Zionist aim of substituting the Arab-Palestinian people by creating a separate political and economic society, the process of encounter changed to replacement, appropriation and deliberate forgetting and rewriting of the past [...] Israeli food culture 'needed' the Arab-Palestinian culture as a source of imitation and localization, but at the same time desired its de-Palestinianisation.' For more on how the Israeli Zionist movement worked to forget and rewrite past Arab-Palestinian food culture, see Ronald Ranta and Yonatan Mendel, 'Palestine and Palestinians in Israeli food culture', *Ethnicities*, 14. 3 (2014), pp. 412-435.

²⁴² Nazeer el-Azma, 'The Tammuzi Movement and the Influence of T.S. Eliot on Badr Shakir al-Sayyab', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 88.4 (1968), pp. 671-678.

²⁴³ Muhsin Jassim al-Musawi, 'Engaging Tradition in Modern Arab Poetics', *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 33.2 (2002), pp. 172-210. Another significant contemporary literary figure of al-Sayyab was Nazik al-Mala'ika. For more on her ideas about poetry, see Nazik al-Mala'ika, *Qadaya al-Shi'r al-mu'asir* (Beirut: Dar al-'Ilm lil-malayin, 1981).

Taking al-Sayyab, thus as an influential figure, whose poetry about tradition and modernity were widely circulated, writers from Palestine also became concerned about how to use tradition in their writings of place. Their works display literary articulations of Palestine with its political predicament. Thus, rather than the land being one of squalor, corruption, prostitution and destitution as we can see in al-Sayyab's poetry, it becomes 'not only a victim city, but also a place of heroism, a bed of resistance, a home for patriotic struggle.'²⁴⁴ As a consequence, the imagery of the land in Palestinian poetry changes. As Jayyusi has argued

one sees, in this literature, a constant image of space, open and dangerous, through which the poet forever moves towards a confined place of anchorage and final settlement [...] and because of a constant but consistently mobile exile, new images appear in poetry, evoking the placelessness of the Palestinian'²⁴⁵.

The shift from a search for rootedness to an existential crisis where exile seems the only possibility, can be argued to mark the trajectory set out by Darwish's poetry. He does so by searching for a new vocabulary to negotiate memories as a form of resistance against the need of rootedness. This trajectory then became foundational for the new official anti-Israeli hegemony within Palestinian nationalist discourses. The land was written using different metaphors from daily life, as well as recycling older metaphors. Jayyusi observes of this renewed interest in the metaphor itself

At its best, this was an oblique and distilled experiment, one which veered away from visible forms around the poet and in which metaphors were esthetic [sic.] necessities that correspond with the poet's own vision. Thus was ushered in an era of high esthetic [sic.] self-

²⁴⁴ Jayyusi, *An Anthology*, p. 47.

²⁴⁵ Jayyusi, *An Anthology*, pp. 47-8.

consciousness, characterised by a very high degree of deliberate mannerism. These markedly modernist features apply more distinctly to the visual arts, but would appear in poetry in the highly adventurous treatment of the metaphor, where the image does not aim to represent reality but is crystallised and realised in its own form and for its own sake. This differs from the conventional use of metaphor in realistic literature, where it was either an ornament or a means of enhancing the direct semantic intention of the poem.²⁴⁶

The metaphors used were constructed as a result of a heightened awareness of one's personal relationship to collective problems, and as a result of a deep engagement with memory games to resist the occupation through accepting these memories as a reality. Thus, even though the metaphor itself may not be based on a reality, the metaphor is based on a memorised notion of reality. Because of the strong hold memory got on the cultural imagination of poets, Jayyusi says that many metaphors created were not always innovative, but were

contrived, inapt, and often totally erroneous or at least totally redundant. The compulsive tendency, in many of these metaphors, to the alienation of the image from its referent (i.e., with the two sides being remote from one another) was often an added complication.²⁴⁷

In this light of redundant images, poetry written in the Arab world between the two World Wars was heavily dependent on religious symbols and nationalist sentiments to support the case of the local Arab population of Palestine against the oppressive force of the Ottomans, British and the state of Israel.²⁴⁸ Following the end of the Second World War, the number of countries in the Arab world gaining

²⁴⁶ Jayyusi, *An Anthology*, p. 49.

²⁴⁷ Jayyusi, *An Anthology*, p. 52.

²⁴⁸ For poetic examples on pre-1948 poetry please see Khalid A. Sulaiman, *Palestine and Modern Arab Poetry* (London: Zed, 1984), pp. 17-39.

independence increased, and the poetry of a past colonial age no longer held for the Arab region as a whole. As a result the literati began to feel a new urge to express their new found social and political realities in a different tone.

The poetry post-1948, as a result became 'deeper and more complex. It created a new tone, coloured with bitterness, frustration and despair'²⁴⁹. The themes also began to be dominated by 'the Palestinian Arab refugees, their longing for the return home, the bitter experience of successive defeats over Palestine and finally the *fida'i*. These themes eventually became the life and blood of modern Arab poetry. While before the Arab poet was mostly concerned with the larger collective Arab identity, Darwish's poetry started to take on more revolutionary tones from hereon forward. The bitterness and despair that tends to depict the refugee as pitiful and helpless, was channelled into a ferment to drive the active and revolutionary figure to be feared.'²⁵⁰

The changes in the language and symbols used in early Palestinian resistance poetry remained reliant on memories of the past through historicised narratives, just like that of the Tammuzi poets, to include the land i. to represent the beloved, ii. to represent the mother, and iii. to include Sindbad, Ulysses and Christ as figures exploring the relationship of human beings to land, through exploration, travel and exile.

The myth of Ulysses and Sindibad denoted a sense of anxiety and restlessness of the Arab individual. Other symbols of martyrdom have included al-Husayn, a religious symbol figure transformed into a symbol of the *fida'i*: 'the one who sacrifices himself' for Palestine. Other symbols of rebirth and resurrection of a reborn and rejuvenated Arab spirit have included Adonis, Phoenix, Osiris, Lazarus, as well as

²⁴⁹ Sulaiman, *Palestine and Modern Arab Poetry*, p. 97.

²⁵⁰ Sulaiman, *Palestine and Modern Arab Poetry*, p. 114.

Christ and al-Husseyin. Symbols for Israelis as hostile enemies have also been included in the poetry of Palestinians since the 1950s, including al-tattar (the Tartar, the Mongols), al-wahsh (the savage), al-tinnin (dragon) al-dhib (wolf) and al-lis (thief).

Sulaiman, the author I have referred to in the analysis of pre-1948 Palestinian poetry, has also traced how this latter period of Palestinian poetry, by Palestinian poets especially instigated a change in the meaning of symbols. The process of signification has changed so that older notions of what was being signified, started to be dismantled from the signifier. Words have changed meaning and their usage has allowed for new revisions of language, and freshly signified concepts to be attached to older signs.²⁵¹ This change in the usage of language, and the functions assigned to language emerged as a result of a change in direction of Arabic poetry in general: from a poetry more attached to the land, to an adherence to a national identity formed out of memories²⁵².

Following the Nakba (1948), the poetic mood became ever more nationalistic, and employed various motifs and symbols that became common across the Arab world. This is evident in the poetry of Nizar Qabbani (1923-1998), who, in addition to al-Sayyab, influenced Darwish and had a definite impact on the imagery and mood in his poetic voice. Additional figures in this vein are Tawfiq Zayyad (1929-1994), Samih al-Qasim (1939-2014), and of course Darwish himself. Poetry, in the wake of the loss of Palestine, achieved a new continuity that ended up, following the June

²⁵¹ Sulaiman, *Palestine*, pp. 188-190.

²⁵² Sulaiman, *Palestine*, p. 197.

Defeat of 1967, in what Ghassan Kanafani (1936-1972) called '*adab al-muqawama* or 'resistance literature'²⁵³.

With the appearance of the PLO in 1964 and the rise of armed struggle²⁵⁴, a new generation of poets appeared. Members of this generation include 'Izz al-Din al-Manasira (1946 -), Murid al-Barghuthi (1944 -), AHmad DaHbur (1946 -), Ibrahim Nasrallah (1954 -), and others such as Mu'in Bsisu (1926 – 1984). Their identifying collective theme could be identified as revolving around the 'future [and] Palestine'²⁵⁵.

Darwish's early poetry heavy with references to genealogy, history and memories – although already inhabited by a sense of humanism, can be seen as a continuation of such themes used by earlier writers of modern Arab poetry such as al-Sayyab and other Tammuzi writers.

From 'Bitaqat Huwiyya' onwards, images of violence such as *salabta kuruma ajdadi*²⁵⁶ (You stole my forefathers' orchards) and *la 'atawassal-ul-sadaqati min babik*²⁵⁷ (I do not beg for charity at your door) serve to communicate an anger against the Israeli atrocities. Ferocity, courageous defiance and resilient resistance – *la 'atawassalu, sajjil*²⁵⁸ – mark the speaker's tone towards the Israeli official. To

²⁵³ Ghassan Kanafani, *al-Adab al-filistini al-muqawim tahta al-ihtilal*, 1948-1968 (Cyprus: Rimal Publications, 2013).

²⁵⁴ For a historical overview of the rise of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation and its development to today, please see Avraham Sela, 'The PLO at First: A Historical Perspective' in *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, 1.3, pp. 269-333. See also Rashid Khalidi, *The Iron Cage: The Story of the Palestinian Struggle for Statehood* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007).

²⁵⁵ Faisal Darraj, 'Transformations in Palestinian Literature', trans. by Michael K. Scott, *Words Without Borders*, 2006 <<http://wordswithoutborders.org/article/transformations-in-palestinian-literature>> [accessed 24 November 2013]. Jaakko Hameen-Anttila makes a rigorous argument for the case of the presence of a link between place and identity in Arabic literature. Its argument is based on detailed analysis of written text such as *al-Hamadani*'s *al-Madiriyya*, as well as examples from the Quran and Arabic philosophical texts. See 'Building an Identity: Place as an Image of Self in Classical Arabic Literature', in *Quaderni di Studi Arabi, Nuova Serie*, 3 (2008), pp. 25-38. Writing place is thus not simply a theme concerning postcolonial Arab politics.

²⁵⁶ Darwish, 'Bitaqat Huwiyya', l. 53, *Diwan Mahmoud Darwish* (Beirut: Dar al-'Awda, 1970), p. 135. Translation mine. All subsequent translations will be mine unless otherwise specified.

²⁵⁷ Darwish, 'Bitaqat Huwiyya', l. 14, *Diwan Mahmoud Darwish* (Beirut: Dar al-'Awda, 1970), p. 135.

²⁵⁸ Darwish, 'Bitaqat Huwiyya', ll. 1, 7, 18, 36, 52, 61, *Diwan*, pp. 131-135.

prove his right to the land, tracing roots, *judhuri*²⁵⁹ and genealogy, *ajdadi*²⁶⁰, is an important facet of their poetry, and invokes the image of Palestinians who are desperate to prove their relationship to the land.

Resisting the official Israeli discourse, Palestinian cultural producers felt it was necessary to produce a counter-narrative, reappropriating scriptural myths and memories of an 'imagined totality' as an alternative to the newly founded Israeli norm. So, in opposition to the image of the natural landscape being a land promised to the Children of Israel, as supported by the reappropriation of religious scriptural narratives, the new Palestinian poetry since the Nakba references the physical landscape as visual images to legitimate Palestinian statehood. Such images populate Darwish's early poetic landscape. *Siru*²⁶¹, *zaytun*²⁶², *al-'ishab*²⁶³, *al-a'wad wa-l-qasab*²⁶⁴ *kurum*²⁶⁵, *mahjar*²⁶⁶ are nouns all used in an iconic sense to signify this in a literal sense.

These literary signs do not point further to another sign. The image becomes one that exists within the signifying structure that is created through linguistic tradition and memories, passed on from one generation to another. The orchards, branches and land fill the poetic landscape the poet creates as visual images in the mind of the reader. Not yet is there an intention to question these images and their connection with their respective signifying structures. For Darwish, a Palestinian is 'he with memories', 'he who can trace a history' (*ana 'ismun bila laqab*²⁶⁷), 'he who

²⁵⁹ Darwish, 'Bitaqat Huwiyya', l. 23, *Diwan*, p. 132.

²⁶⁰ Darwish, 'Bitaqat Huwiyya', l. 53, *Diwan*, p. 135.

²⁶¹ Darwish, 'Bitaqat Huwiyya', l. 26, *Diwan*, p. 133.

²⁶² Darwish, 'Bitaqat Huwiyya', l. 26, *Diwan*, p. 133.

²⁶³ Darwish, 'Bitaqat Huwiyya', l. 27, *Diwan*, p. 133.

²⁶⁴ Darwish, 'Bitaqat Huwiyya', l. 33, *Diwan*, p. 133.

²⁶⁵ Darwish, 'Bitaqat Huwiyya', l. 53, *Diwan*, p. 135.

²⁶⁶ Darwish, 'Bitaqat Huwiyya', l. 9, *Diwan*, p. 132.

²⁶⁷ Darwish, 'Bitaqat Huwiyya', l. 20, *Diwan*, p. 132.

is part of the land', 'he who has a history as old as the trees' and 'he whose roots are as deep as the trees in the orchards' (*judhuri.../ qabla milad-i-zzamani rasat*²⁶⁸).

Darwish thus uses the established traditions of Arabic myths and cultural epistemes to challenge the assumptions and myths used by the orthodoxy of the Israeli state. Juxtaposed to Golda Meir's statement 'that there are no Palestinians'²⁶⁹, Darwish's poetic voice indicates the long history of ploughing the land – *abi min usrat-il mihrathi*²⁷⁰ and *jaddi kana fallahan*²⁷¹ – which is also an important feature of early postcolonial literature.²⁷² All these references to the past indicate a deep engagement with memory as a given truth.

Palestinians' right to their land is corroborated by the fact that their ancestors 'cultivated' the land since time immemorial indicated in the lines: *judhuri/ qabla milad-i-zzamani rasat*²⁷³. The relationship between time and space here is a metaphysical one, unmeasured by scientific facts and paradigms, by a logical connection between self and land. 'Memories' are the only sites which can be presented in opposition to the Israeli official state narrative.

There are many other examples which show the role of memory of the Palestinian landscape on Darwish's poetic imagery. A great example is his early poem 'Yawmiyyat jurh filistini' ('Diary of a Palestinian Wound') which articulates a canonised trope of a gendered Palestine and its land:

This land that sucks the skin of martyrs.
Promises summer with wheat and planets.

²⁶⁸ Darwish, 'Bitaqat Huwiyya', l. 23-4, *Diwan*, p. 132-3.

²⁶⁹ Golda Meir, *The Sunday Times*, 15 June 1969.

²⁷⁰ Darwish, 'Bitaqat Huwiyya', l. 28, *Diwan*, p. 133.

²⁷¹ Darwish, 'Bitaqat Huwiyya', l. 30, *Diwan*, p. 133.

²⁷² Much effort has been put into scholarly research on the relationship between colonised and land as expressed in literary culture. For more on this, please see Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003); *Mapping the Sacred: Religion, Geography and Postcolonial Literatures*, ed. by Jamie S. Scott & Paul Simpson-Housley (Cross/ Cultures 48; Amsterdam & Atlanta G.A.: 2001).

²⁷³ Darwish, 'Bitaqat Huwiyya', l. 23-24, *Diwan*, p. 132-3.

So worship it!
 We are the salt and water of its gut.
 We are a wound on its lap, that fights²⁷⁴
 [...]
 O my unyielding wound,
 My country is not a suitcase
 And I am not a traveller
 I am the lover and the land is the beloved.²⁷⁵

Palestine is defined here by its sacrificial status, its catastrophe of loss and multiplying deaths. The poetic voice in the lines above moves from a collective voice ('we'), to the singular ('I'), almost in a cinematic way. Zooming in from the land, to the collective nation, to the individual, the poetic speaker contextualises the messiness of the Palestinian situation, where the image of the land is defined by different influence, such as violent events, the death of its civilian populace, but also by love.

The sensuous image of the land as lover has been a common trope used by Palestinian poets since 1948. The use of such symbols, all manufactured out of 'organic' (used in the sense of being derived from living matter) materials, such as skin, wheat, planets, salt and water all function to create a signifying system that constructs an image of Palestine as existing before culture, before artificiality, a land pre-historic and pre-Historic. 'The land' functions as a poetic form of resistance to fend off criticism that the Palestinians are unjustified in their claims to Palestine.

As poetic images formed using words, the resulting signifying structure is that of a larger image. An image uses metaphorical language to construct a paradigm through which to contemplate and negotiate a vision of the actual land Palestine. As the symbols 'land', 'martyrs', 'skin', 'wheat', 'planets', 'salt', 'water', 'homeland', 'suitcase' and 'traveller' are individually arbitrary, they could, in theory, have no

²⁷⁴ Darwish, 'Yawmiyyat jarhun filistini', ll. 64-68, *Diwan*, p. 389

²⁷⁵ Darwish, 'Yawmiyyat jarhun filistini', ll. 82-85, *Diwan*, p. 391.

definitive signified substance. However, as these symbols make reference to an intended interpretant by the author – used here in the Peircean sense to denote a predefined meaning intended by the author to communicate to his audience²⁷⁶ – and as the author depends on a communal or at least a mutual understanding of symbols in order to communicate meaning, these symbols weave together a tapestry reliant on memory, while circulating traditions of signification.

How meaning is communicated in poetry depends largely on a shared signification system, a mutual understanding of indexical signs. The names of the rivers Nile, Volga, Congo, Jordan and Euphrates are used by Darwish to signify that the Palestinian land has a life and history of its own. Significations such as this are built also on indexical relationships, enabling metaphors to produce meaning. Meaning is symbolised through association, by pointing at one sign but meaning something else, which is associated to that one sign.

In the lines below, Darwish uses both indexical and iconic signs to refer to the land of Palestine:

My friend! The Nile does not flow into the Volga,
Nor does the Congo nor the Jordan River flow into the
Euphrates.
Each river has its own source, its course, and its life.
My friend! Our land is no barren land.
Each land has its birth date;
Every dawn, has a revolutionary's appointed time.²⁷⁷

In response to yearnings of Palestinians who wish they were in a different situation, the poetic voice responds by using proper nouns to illustrate the impossibility of being uprooted from one's land. As no two rivers ever merge, as the

²⁷⁶ Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, Vols. 5-6, ed. by Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1933), p. 108.

²⁷⁷ Darwish, "An al-'Umniyat", ll. 13-19, *Diwan*, p. 183.

lines above indicate, Palestinians similarly have their own 'source', 'course' and 'life'. Talking to his friend, the comradeship suggested by the possessive pronoun 'our' as well as the general tone and repetition of 'my friend', re-establishes the image of the collective identity envisaged through its *fida'i*, a loyal patriot, willing to sacrifice his life for his homeland.

The result of people 'ris[ing]' to fight against oppression in each land is born, suggesting that the symbols relating to Palestine are continuously being recreated and redefined through continuous struggle against oppression. There is a universal element indexically suggested here, as this could be said of every land, where epochs in history are continuously reworking memories of the past to justify certain political stances of the present, and thus create a playground for battling out different ideologies through constructions of the past.

The beginnings of a new poetry

As early as 1970, Darwish had become aware of the power of memories to resist oppression. Powerful words and images had been circulating throughout history, without deconstructing the signifier-signified relationship. Even though he began to question the very nature of semiotic systems in poetry, his engagement of this issue was still taking place from the perspective of political oppression.

This symbolic nature of Palestine, reiterated and continuously reworked from the conflict and suffering experienced by Palestinians, finds a different form of expression in another of Darwish's poems. From 'The Roses and the Dictionary', Darwish calls for a new poetic form and language.

I search for light and new poetry in the rubble.

Did you realise before today, my love,
 That a letter in the dictionary is full?
 How do all these words live?
 How do they grow? How do they get bigger?
 We still nourish them with tears of memories
 And metaphors and sugar.
 Be that as it may,
 I must reject roses that spring
 From the dictionary or a diwan of poetry
 The rose grows on the arm of a peasant, on the fist of a
 labourer,
 The rose grows on the wound of a fighter
 And on the face of a rock.²⁷⁸

This new poetry emerges from the 'rubble' that is created through the destruction of images of Palestinian homes and infrastructure. From deconstruction, a new form of construction takes place. The new poetry or language ('rose') is created, not from 'memories' and literary canons, but the rose on the 'wound' of the working populace, the civilian population that struggle for survival and take up arms to do so. Darwish used the example of the rose to denote how critics and the Palestinian political establishment appropriate poetry for their agenda of political recognition of statehood.

Putting this theory of deconstruction into his own poetry, Darwish explores the actual writing of poetry, and the way in which our epistemological realities – the epistemes that we have consumed through dictionaries, anthologies and memories – forge a constructed reality divided from the actual experience with the land.

Like Sausurre juxtaposes *langue* and *parole*²⁷⁹, Darwish juxtaposes human experience and reality: the lived experience of Palestinians cannot be expressed through *langue*, through dictionary definitions and 'diwans', or volumes of canonical poetry, but only through the experience with the land. Just like Khedairi's Umm

²⁷⁸ Darwish, 'Al-wardu wa-l-qamus', ll. 14-27 from 'Akhiru-l-layl (1970) in *Diwan*, pp. 24-25.

²⁷⁹ Christopher Beedham, 'Saussurean Structuralism', in *Language and Meaning: the Structural Creation of Reality* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2005), p. 10.

Ghayib opposes the Iraqi art canon in search for a representation of the quotidian, Darwish also seeks for new poetry to speak of the ordinary man.

Poetry should no longer be about romantic and nostalgic notions. Instead it is to thunderously, forcefully, and vociferously expostulate the injustices brought upon the Palestinian civilian populace. The roses emerge from the Palestinian landscape as experienced not merely by the upper classes, but by the wider Palestinian population, who have an earthy, organic relationship with the land. This includes labourers who plough and work the land, peasants who try to earn whatever living they can from the land and warriors, who fight for the land, using parts of the land, including a rock.

Just like Adunis, who challenged the epistemes constructed by the early Arab theorists²⁸⁰, Darwish contests the assumptions we make about language, poetry, and our understanding of the world. By questioning those very symbols that are used in poetry, Darwish transforms the thought processes behind the epistemological frameworks that define the Palestinian landscape in discourses on Palestine. This shift in his approach to the land's representation is to be more critical as I will show below.

Shifting metaphorical paradigms: resistance beyond memories and myths

Those literary hegemonies that were part of Darwish's cultural milieu framed poetic articulations of the Palestinian land, even in Darwish's own poetry. The images of the land through poetry became used and repeated so much that they became part of an established way to talk about Palestine. Darwish later found this problematic, because it meant that people reading the poetry would always see images of Palestine in light

²⁸⁰ Adonis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics* (London: Saqi, 2003), p. 56.

of old traditions and circulating memories, rather than immediate reality. He elaborates that the Palestinian landscape is precisely unique because

you cannot experience it without the echo of those [biblical] passages [...] you begin to refer to the text to read nature, not the other way around. The land is so rich in legends and myths. I am a secular person, yet I find that I cannot liberate myself from feeling that in this place God spoke to man and produced his miracles. I find that the landscape is already written, and because it has been so fully described, I feel it is difficult to add to it. The poetic image has been realised geographically. My role as a contemporary poet is to liberate the natural landscape from the burden of those legends and ease the burden of history. We need to read the rose as a rose, not the interpretation of it as the blood of Adonis. The role of the poet is to celebrate life, not through history but through life itself.²⁸¹

The land of Palestine according to Darwish is always caught up in a messy forest of memories, as narrated through legends, myths and history. Thus, the geographical space of Palestine is never neutral. In fact, every glance at a space becomes a constructed gaze making one's perception that of a hybrid 'Third Space'²⁸². As the land of Palestine has already 'been written about and described', whenever one mentions this sign, a host of other signifiers come into order creating another hierarchy of signified images and verbal constructions. In a reversal of Roland Barthes' 'Death of the Author'²⁸³, the 'text' of Palestine cannot be divorced from the 'authorship' of the literary texts that employ biblical narratives and ancient myths in the imaginative construction of the landscape.

The landscape is overwhelmingly caught in a forest of texts, so much so that the actual referent, the landscape itself, becomes invisible. This is also true of

²⁸¹ Darwish, in Raja Shehadeh and Mahmoud Darwish, *Bomb*, 81 (2002), p. 59.

²⁸² Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), p. 55.

²⁸³ Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author' in *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana, 1977), pp. 142-148

Palestinian art, where ‘the interpretation of metaphors and allegories [...] could only be understood in context of the popularised images that have first been articulated verbally’²⁸⁴, as Kamal Boullata argues. Images found in poetry that have become popular and canonised inform the creation of visual images in art. Those signs prevalent in Darwish’s later poetry have assumed a different metaphorical role that is unlike its historical usage in Palestinian and Arab poetry.

The basis of the Palestinian conflict lies in this invisibility of the landscape. Each party reads the land according to different texts or a different interpretation of texts, coating it in various myths, whilst ignoring the land itself. The land is always read, in political discourse, as a symbolic place, as a religious, historical place. For example, God’s promise of land to the people of Israel as a compensation for their suffering has often been a central point of disagreement and contested debate amongst the religious in both Palestinian and Israeli circles. Seen as the burden of ‘history’, Darwish sees peace only to be attainable by liberating the land from religious discourses and ‘legends’, as these metanarratives have only served to divide people rather than bring them together in harmony. ‘History’ has become a ‘burden’ because those who have chosen to bind themselves to it have become slaves to a sentimentalised notion of place, rather than choose to adopt a more realistic reading of it as a physical reality.

To further emphasise this we are told that ‘we need to read the rose as a rose, not the interpretation of it as the blood of Adonis: peace can only be achieved when people’s imagination is liberated from myths which interpret reality through legends from the past. Thus, literary criticism must avoid being subjected to historical and mythical readings. For Darwish, the poetic image must strive for autonomy from the

²⁸⁴ Kamal Boullata, *Palestinian Art: From 1850 to the Present* (London: Saqi, 2009), p. 28.

memory of place that has been artificially constructed through historical texts and myths. In order for this to happen, images must be created using words which have not become canonised symbols circulating in political discourses, such as the discourses of Palestinian autonomy, and which manipulate cultural figures for their own purposes.

Syncing these two ideas, of the poetic and the political, it cannot be denied that Darwish's poetic aspiration was both a political and poetic project. Finding himself caught between criticism that views him as only writing about Palestine, and between his own desires to shake off the garbs of history and memory, Darwish finally admits that

I shall only be liberated of [*sic*] Palestine when Palestine is liberated. Then it shall no longer be a condition to be here in order to write. That which is sought after is easier to write about. That which is realised is harder. No one praises a country that is liberated. You praise what has not been attained.²⁸⁵

The liberation of Palestine could be taken as both a literal liberation and a metaphorical one. Literally, the poet will only be free of the burden to write about Palestine when people have been given their rights, when they are given equal opportunities in the work field, in education, when they have equal access to water and land resources and when the people are allowed to live and travel freely.

This is the form of liberation which seems more pressing. But there is another form of liberation which is more fundamental than this, and which could be seen to be the root problem of the political oppression the Palestinian population faces in Israel. This liberation is the emancipation of the land from literary hackneyed discourses,

²⁸⁵ Darwish, Shehadeh, p. 59.

liberated from metanarratives, liberated from memory, invented on occasions to serve political purposes, and from the ‘burden of history’ as we have noted and discussed previously.

Only upon reaching this aim can Darwish fully realise his individuality as artist aside from his identity as a Palestinian national poet. With the Israeli occupation and attendant competing discourses on Palestine/Israel, which obfuscates the everyday experience of the land, Darwish’s self, identity and poetry are completely hijacked by the political need and necessity to speak about Palestine as a ‘homeland’ and about the ‘right to return’ supported by myth and history.

In order to counter-act and resist these various political powers and literary traditions, Darwish uses his poetic practices to imagine an alternative notion of space. Here, Gaston Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space* will enable a richer engagement of how poetic creativity and space are intertwined.

His examination of the comforting and pleasing *heimlich*²⁸⁶ spaces, lead him to conclude that comforting and canny spaces provide the paradigms necessary for poetic creation. Spaces are capable of producing rich human experiences that are necessary for poetic creation. In other words, these spaces both house human experiences and creativity, but creativity also shelters and retains those spaces and memory.

Bachelard’s work is about space, how we experience that space and the role of the poetic imagination in constructing the experience of the space. Bachelard’s analysis of space essentially reverts back to his concerns regarding ontology, hence the nature of our being, which he sees as being defined by our experiences of the

²⁸⁶ Here I use *heimlich* in the Freudian sense to mean homely, or canny. For more on Freud’s theory of the uncanny, please see Pamela Thurschwell, *Sigmund Freud* (London; New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 117-9.

world and thus our experiences of space amongst other things. Our experience of space influences human existence and this notion leads to his discussion of the poetic image.

Poetic images are thus formed as a result of rational thought as well as unconscious thought, mediated through language.²⁸⁷ Our being and experiences of the world can be questioned and rediscovered through poetic images, as they help us to understand our relationship with the space around us, our environment, nature and the world. As human experience of the built and natural environment shapes the construction of poetic creativity, interpretations of this space are going to be filtering through the poetry.

Yet, the reverse is also true. The real environment of space, nature and the world is also understood through readings of written, visual, oral and concrete ‘texts’, such as poetry, novels, personal anecdotes, objects, photographs and paintings. Understandings of the present, existing space are ‘read’ and ‘understood’ through these creative texts.

A photograph taken in the late nineteenth century of Palestinian farmers picking olives, for example could be used to corroborate the existence of Palestinians before the arrival of British colonial forces, which may serve as counter-hegemonic evidence of the Israeli state’s denial of the existence of Arab people in the land of Palestine. The images that populate Judeo-Christian Biblical texts of Israel as the ‘Promised Land’, have had a strong role in inspiring the State of Israel’s political rhetoric.²⁸⁸

²⁸⁷ Paul Dolan, *Happiness by Design: Finding Pleasure and Purpose in Everyday Life* (London: Allen Lane, 2014).

²⁸⁸ Ira Sharkansky, *Governing Israel: Chosen People, Promised Land and Prophetic Tradition* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2005).

This is a problematic notion for both Darwish and Bachelard. Both believe that one's attitude towards how the land is appropriated and used by people should not be based on canonical, religious or historical narratives. Bachelard argues for an emancipation of language, and thus thought, from these older traditions that are used to serve political means. Through liberating poetry from canonised metaphors, one opens up the avenue of a more critical engagement with memory and traditions. As Bachelard states

If, through poetry, we restore to the activity of language
its free field of expression, we are obliged to supervise
the use of fossilised metaphors.²⁸⁹

Fossilised metaphors, according to Bachelard, consist of images that have been used repeatedly in culture. Examples of this are the references to rebirth in Mesopotamian mythological writings used by the Tammuzi poets. In order to liberate language from the manacles of historical narratives, the poet must dismantle these poetic images and create ones that subvert previous images. Artistic production cannot be separated from physical spaces nor from mental spaces, spaces are both imagined and real, and most importantly, they are in continuous flux.

By talking of how Palestine is described using metaphors – such as Palestine as Christ, or as Tammuz which will be reborn²⁹⁰ – I am referring to how the change of space also includes the way in which space is imagined: hence, the relationship each artist and poet has with the land and the way in which he/she chooses to express his imaginings of the land using different, fresh and unique poetic images.

²⁸⁹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. by Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994) p. 221.

²⁹⁰ A great example of poetry which uses Christ as a metaphor for Palestine is found in 'Abdul Wahhab al-Bayyati's collections of five poems known as 'Qaṣa'id ila Yafa' from his collection *Al-Majd li-l-Atfal* (1956). Hussein N Kadhim, 'Abd al-Wahhab al-Bayati's "Ode to Jaffa"', *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 32.2 (2001), pp. 88-106 makes a detailed textual analysis of these.

These images and symbols used to express the land are therefore also changing. If spaces reflect human experiences according to Bachelard, then the landscapes of Palestine, created in poetry and the visual arts, also house a variety of human experiences, as the landscape is in constant flux, thus necessitating a transformation in the way the landscape is communicated.

The need for such a transformation was felt by Darwish most intensely in the 2000s. In this period his choice of words marks a shift in the relationship with memory as more distant and slippery, rather than as referring to a solid, given truth. In these later works Darwish moves away from the synonymous relationship between the land of Palestine and the identity of the Palestinian people. His poetry of the 2000s in particular engages more with metaphysical issues such as life, death and love (without completely abandoning his concern with Palestine). His poetry moves on from objectifying the land and the collective voice to give voice to the Palestinian individual. Of this trajectory in his poetic career he said, “‘It is time that the voice of the Palestinian individual should resonate, broken, ambivalent, pained’”²⁹¹. Elsewhere, he states ‘Palestine is the group homeland, but my personal homeland is where I can interpret and understand every flower’²⁹².

Darwish thus distinguishes between the collective and shared space, and the individual private space of thought, interpretation and poetry. He is caught in between writing about these two spaces: the political, real space, and the imaginative, creative and personal space. I would argue that it is in the creative space that the poet can function, because it is free from the physical torment of occupation.

²⁹¹ Salti, ‘From Resistance and Bearing Witness’, p. 47.

²⁹² Darwish, *Shehadeh*, p. 59.

Furthermore, even within the creative space, readings and interpretations of ‘every flower’, through the inevitability of migrating texts and influences, the personal space will always be invaded by other readings and interpretations. Thus, the personal space of poetry is another place where forms of hegemony can impose themselves through the power of myths and history. Describing this authority as ‘a metaphorical siege’²⁹³, it is only ‘meditation’²⁹⁴ which can end the occupation.

Darwish in his later work strives to look beyond the Israeli military occupation. The epic poem *State of Siege* is an attempt to transcend the physical and look instead at the mental-scape created by the ‘place’²⁹⁵ and ‘the futility of the ages’²⁹⁶. The siege Darwish examines in this poem is physical as well as metaphorical. Darwish goes beyond a simplistic writing of the land to a more nuanced and playful writing of landscape based on an attempted liberation from the land. In essence, he contemplates the ephemeral and the infinite power of poetry in cultural memory. Of this he states in an interview:

[The poet] must have the possibility of connecting the daily with the metaphysical. [...] I have managed to write a long text called *State of Siege*, in which I tried to liberate myself from the Israeli occupation and involve myself in poetics. But because the occupation is constant it never ceases to be an uphill battle.²⁹⁷

Political concerns should not suffocate the poetic voice, according to Darwish, and be allowed to colonise the imagination so that poetry cannot contemplate other-worldly concerns and issues. Instead of writing about the violence of military

²⁹³ Mahmoud Darwish, *State of Siege* in *The Butterfly's Burden*, trans. by Fady Joudah (Tarsset, Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2007), p. 146.

²⁹⁴ Darwish, *State of Siege*, p. 146.

²⁹⁵ Darwish, *State of Siege*, p. 146.

²⁹⁶ Darwish, *State of Siege*, p. 146.

²⁹⁷ Darwish, Shehadeh, ‘Mahmoud Darwish’, p. 55.

occupation, *State of Siege* strives to write about the everyday and metaphysical issues like love, life and death. On what this stems from, Darwish says:

In 1967, with the Arab defeat in the June war [...] there was a lot of fantasizing [...] that tried to compensate for the defeat that the nation was suffering. [...] so there was the urge to liberate poetry from empty rhetoric and romanticism and bring back to it the pulse of life. This was later followed by another attempt at liberating poetry from both realism and modernism (in its Arabic version) through an attempt at total deviation from reality, emotion and traditional forms. What is noticeable, though, throughout these phases that Arabic poetry went through is that all these changes were connected to political events. The first defeat led us to return to reality and then the failure to defeat the defeat led us to a mistaken understanding of modernism. In other words, poetry could never reflect on itself in the absence of external events and political influences. In the particular Palestinian case, what our poetry needs is to be humanised. We cannot be defined by our relationship, positive or negative, to Israel. We have our own identity, a personality that is peculiar to us, just as we have our own questions that are particular to our condition, in addition to the others that we share with the rest of humanity. The Palestinian cannot just be defined as terrorist or freedom fighter. Any trite, routine image ends up reducing and usurping the humanity of the Palestinian and renders him unable to be seen as merely human. He becomes either the hero or the victim –not just a human being. Therefore I very seriously advocate our right to be frivolous. I strongly believe in our right to be frivolous. The sad truth is that in order to reach that stage of being frivolous we would have to achieve victory over the impediments that stand in the way of our enjoying such a right.²⁹⁸

What Darwish is advocating is the detachment of Palestinian identity from the political projections of that identity, instead creating wider connections between the Palestinian self and the human self, although never sacrificing the particularities of Palestinian experiences, traditions and customs. He does this because the media and

²⁹⁸ Darwish, Shahadeh, 'Mahmoud Darwish', p. 58.

official political discourses of Israel, Palestine and the international community project the Palestinian identity as one solely rooted in tragedy. Although Palestinian people are unique in their experience of a certain kind of occupation, and there is a collective pain being experienced, the Palestinian people are also individuals with their own personal issues and concerns free from the conflict with Israel.

Yet as presented in political discourses, without this conflict it seems that Palestinians would cease to exist, as if Israel's constant oppression has reduced the Palestinian self to one of dependency on its torture. Darwish's *State of Siege* is filled with the complexity of trying to liberate the poetic self from the Israeli occupation and transcend it, but constantly finds that the aggression, immediacy and constancy of the latter cannot be ignored. Thus, Darwish engages with the planetarity which includes both collective experiences, but also individual subjectivities. As such Darwish's poetry is filled with references to the Israeli colonial project, *and* clustered with language relating to nature, love, death, the self and the soul.

State of Siege embodies resistance to literary traditions, as well as to totalizing effects of Israeli occupation. The tension that results is an indication of Darwish's unsettled response to the whole notion of a siege, which is political and poetic: this siege will extend until we teach our enemies/ examples from our Jahili poetry²⁹⁹.

The siege is not simply political, but epistemological and pedagogical as well. On the other hand paradigms of canonical Jahili poetry must be shared with people at the other ideological side, in order to dismantle the cultural prejudices that control our cultural imagination. If understanding is strongly dependant upon transgression of one's own immediate historical, cultural and linguistic boundaries, then for Darwish, poetry has the power to initiate mutual respect. He is calling for a new network of

²⁹⁹ Darwish, *State of Siege* in *The Butterfly's Burden*, p. 120.

relations between Israelis and Arabs that is based on understanding each others' aesthetic modes, which are in turn related to other ways of conceiving relationships between human individuals and the environment.

Despite the call for mutual respect and understanding based on delineating epistemological boundaries, the poem still associates *hisar* with *a'da* (enemies); this signifies Darwish's earlier statement about the inability of his poetry to only talk about poetics, the everyday and the metaphysical. Everything, even reading poetry, returns to the Israeli military occupation.

Occupation plays itself out in the overshadowing of history over his poetic imagination, and his own constructs of poetic images:

If the history of this place was less crowded
Our eulogies of the
Poplar trees' undulations would have been greater!³⁰⁰

Darwish is lamenting 'eulogies' of the landscape that cannot exist without the excessive burden of history. The traditions of historical narratives which provide people with concrete and fossilised metaphors of the landscape, has meant that even the poet struggles to emancipate himself from the authority of history. It is a hegemony which is more powerful than politics itself, because the control and siege is based on ideological differences rooted in memories and historical narratives. These memories circulate in society because they are removed from their place in the past and enter a new state of exile:

If you look behind you, you will only see
An exile behind you:
Your bedroom,
The courtyard willow,

³⁰⁰ Darwish, *State of Siege in The Butterfly's Burden*, p. 136.

The river behind the glass buildings,
 And the café of our trysts...all of it, all
 preparing to become exile³⁰¹

Everything becoming 'exile' signifies that everything will become a memory, taken out of its spatial and temporal original state. All spaces, including 'your bedroom', 'the courtyard willow' and 'the river' thus become texts which will change based on the occupying power. Amplifying Darwish's intent to demolish the powerful grasp of the Israeli occupation over the writing of Palestine, the poetic voice constructs a visual every day scene, whereby soldiers are humanised and hide behind an Iron Wall, arguably a metaphor for psychological barriers that create prejudices. They are still to be found carrying out daily, human activities, such as urinating:

The cypress trees are minarets behind the soldiers
 Protecting the sky against declivity. And behind the
 iron
 fence soldiers are urinating – under a tank's
 surveillance -
 and the autumn day completes its golden stroll
 in a street spacious like a church
 after Sunday prayer ...³⁰²

The whole passage has a somewhat strangely awkward, serene feeling to it, in which 'the guard time' still continues peacefully in a depopulated space. Darwish is imagining an alternative future where the humdrum, trivial and everyday can take place in the accommodating and open space of poetic freedom emancipated from the torments of military occupation, hence in a spacious street.

Although Darwish is still creating poetic images using religious symbols (the cypress tree is used in Isaiah 44:14); minarets, Church, Sunday prayer), his ideas are

³⁰¹ Darwish, 'Kana Yanquşuna Hâdir' in *Sarîru-l-gharîba* in *The Butterfly's Burden*, p. 4.

³⁰² Darwish, *State of Siege* in *The Butterfly's Burden*, p. 128.

unique to him, and do not mimic religious narratives normally associated with them. The cypress tree in the verse from Isaiah is used in a reference to humans' (the Biblical verse specifies carpenters') weakness, where the fire burnt from the cypress trees warms the food that humans need for sustenance. Also, from the minaret the mu'edhin would traditionally stand and call to prayer. By using these symbols of the architectural and natural environment without their 'original' religious connotations, Darwish carves out his own mode of signification and creates poetic images unique to him. This could be seen as his effort to protect the image of the land from the history, emphasised in the following line:

This siege will extend until
The besieger feels, like the sieged,
That boredom
Is a human trait.³⁰³

As if to confirm the emotional siege, 'besieger' and 'sieged' indicate that the siege could be political, but also psychological. If the siege will continue until there is a common understanding that humans have the same feelings, then the siege no longer is a political notion. Contrarily, the siege exists because there is an understanding that boredom can only be felt by one side, either the besieger or the sieged. Thus, using the term 'siege' (heavily encoded in Palestinian political discourse), to challenge understandings of humanity and human feelings, we can see that the poetic voice is fighting to emancipate itself from the land and political rhetoric. This struggle continues in the following lines:

A country preparing for dawn,
we won't disagree
on the martyr's share of the land,

³⁰³ Darwish, *State of Siege in The Butterfly's Burden*, p. 142.

Here they are equals
 Spreading out the grass for us
 so that we'd unite!³⁰⁴

Several cluster groups relating to space populate this stanza: 'country', 'land' and 'grass'. Darwish cannot avoid writing about Palestine, except that here, the land is on the edge of a 'dawn', promising a hopeful future. This new conceptualisation of space at the time of a new 'dawn' enables a reconciliation in social relationships where 'us' and 'they' are confused and conflated.

Unlike Darwish's earlier poetry discussed above, here pronouns which indicate collective groups of people are not identified in nationalist or racial terms. He is exploring a more universal question of conflict and socially constructed conflicting identities, charged by narratives of memories and myths.

The need to 'unite' is not completely dissimilar to Spivak's call for planetary ways of understanding the comprehensive collectivity of humanity, which requires people to 'unite' without reducing any singular group into a single category using identity politics. Thus, globalisation's tendency to reduce people to members of differentiated, identitarian categorised groups merely to control them is resisted. These binaries are inherent in globalisation according to Spivak, and affirmed by Bauman in his discussion of the global 'place of flows'. They confirm the right of Israel to exist, but paradoxically, affirm the Palestinian nation.

As has been shown in the introduction to this Chapter, affirmation of the Palestinian nation is only enabled as it eases the function of Israeli economic processes. Politically therefore, the Palestinian nation must be affirmed in order for the Israeli state and market to abuse the Palestinian labour force. This economic

³⁰⁴ Darwish, *State of Siege in The Butterfly's Burden*, p. 130.

cooperation, facilitated by the Oslo Accords, was internalised by Darwish and critiqued in the poetic metaphors of his later poetry. Thus, although the global requires binary opposition to exist in order for flows of capital to take place, Darwish calls for a common humanity such as in the lines:

O you standing at the doorsteps, enter
and drink Arabic coffee with us
(you might feel you are human like us)
O you standing at the house doorsteps,
Get out of our mornings,
We need reassurance that we
Are human like you!³⁰⁵

The oppositional terms ‘us’ and ‘you’ are used subversively in order to allow the ‘you’, at the liminal space of the ‘doorsteps’ to ‘enter’ the house. I would argue that Darwish at this point became increasingly critical of the economic cooperation between Israel and the PA which created marked differences in the quality of life led by Palestinian and Israelis. This criticism is not just of globalisation which encourages Israel to manipulate the vulnerability of the PA for any kind of recognition and peace settlements, but is also critical of the canonised conceptualisation of what it means to be Palestinian. This discourse of a singular Palestinian identity is manipulated by the PA, forcing writers to use specific key words in order to be celebrated by the Palestinian canonizing authorities.

Yet as this example shows, Darwish calls for a neutral conceptualisation of difference, one void of identitarian politics. The ‘you’ and ‘us’ can easily be blurred, as Darwish avoids using signifiers to denote Israelis or Palestinians. Peace will only come when both sides come to the table with a renewed mentality and mindset, when

³⁰⁵ Darwish, *State of Siege in The Butterfly's Burden*, p. 124.

they leave their histories, memories and prejudices at the door, and walk into the neutral spaces of memory-neutral and demythologised imagery.

Summary

Resistance for Darwish is at the heart of his relationship with words. But it would be erroneous to suggest that his struggle was solely engaged with the Israeli occupation. As has been shown above, Darwish was deeply engaged with the need to emancipate his poetry, to liberate it from being co-opted by the PLO to create a binary opposition to Israeli cultural identity. Both the Israeli occupation, and paradoxically the notion of a Palestinian nation-state required the manipulation of memories in order to circulate symbols of an 'imagined totality'. In creating oppositional identities, the flows of global capital have created an economic situation whereby Israeli occupation can continue, while simultaneously a Palestinian government can exist, albeit with severely restricted functions and power. Testament to this are the Oslo Accords of 1993 which enabled peace, as long as it opened the Israeli economy to the flows of global capital. Palestinians were only to benefit from these flows marginally.

Faced with the occupation, accepted by the Palestinian government, and permitted by international political and economic establishments, Darwish strived to create a new poetry which attempted to abandon the symbols borrowed from memories of the past, as narrated in canonical and scriptural texts. These memories of the past became an important site for the struggles against the literary canon as such. Poetics for Darwish created metaphors which divorce the signified from the signifier. Words are constructed which blur and complicate memory narratives that depend on binary opposition and 'imagined totality' As such especially Darwish's later work

was partly geared against the need for a canonised Palestinian national culture, as it agitated against the adoption of memories of a pre-colonial past, as it remained geared against the Israeli state and against the hegemony of globalisation.

3

FROM THE WRITTEN TO THE VISUAL: DEPOPULATING THE MYTHS OF PALESTINE IN STEVE SABELLA'S PHOTOGRAPHY

Palestinian Memories

Complicating memories and disrupting linear narratives based on literary and scriptural canonical texts, Darwish opposes the hegemonies of globalisation, the affirmation of the Israeli state, the notion of a unified and singular Palestinian nation. Peace for Darwish can not only begin when the present is read in terms of memories, whether embodied in literary, political or scriptural narratives. These memories, which contribute to dichotomous constructs of identity, must be questioned by creating new metaphors to communicate problems beyond the political. By employing such new metaphors, his poetry became a form of resistance against memories and found a new freedom to contemplate existential issues.

This change in approach to the cultural productions is not only seen in Palestinian writers. Visual artists began to take the a similar approach in their relation to Palestine. One such figure is Steve Sabella. Sabella works towards the 'complication' of redundant visual symbols circulating in the media of Palestine and Palestinians.

Sabella's photography exhibits a resistance both to new global order of communication that depends on the fast circulation of photographic images. He is critical of how these amount to what Bauman calls 'imagined totalities', the creation of new fixed memories of Palestine and Palestinians in the imagination of consumers

of media, reflecting old national priorities, which in turn project reductive and totalising visual models of what constitutes Palestinian and Israeli individuals.

Similar to Darwish's literary metaphors, Sabella's photography produces a new aesthetics that brings a twenty-first century understanding of how to communicate visually through depopulating images of 'imagined totalities' inherent in globalist and national stereotypes. Unlike Darwish however, Sabella was not canonised whilst in Palestine. His emergence on the cultural scene depended on his affiliation with Western institutions, especially given his Christian identity.

Although born to a large Christian Palestinian family he lived in a Muslim neighbourhood in the Old City of East Jerusalem. He studied art and photography in Jerusalem (1997 - 2000), New York (2007) and London (2008 - 2009). Hence Sabella's education started local and later became increasingly 'glocal'. As I will discuss later, Sabella's works demonstrate an ambiguous relationship with the international art market, insisting on creating artworks relevant to him, rather than commercially marketable.³⁰⁶

This resistance to the art market, with its own hegemonies to exert onto visual artists, as I will discuss below, demonstrates Sabella's deep engagement with the Palestinian cause. Through understanding the politics of the international art market (facilitated by his MA at Sotheby's), Sabella is able to play one political game, in order to access a wider cultural audience, especially given the fact that he was marginalised in Palestine (unlike Darwish who was celebrated there). He uses his

³⁰⁶ Much literature has been written on this issue. For more see Timothy Cone, 'Regulating the Art Market', *Arts Magazine*, 64.7 (1990), pp. 21-2; *Economic Engagements with Art*, ed. by Neil De Marchi and Craufurd D. W. Goodwin (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); Mark W. Rectanus, *Culture Incorporated: Museums, Artists and Corporate Sponsorships* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Chin-tao Wu, *Privatising Culture: Corporate Art Intervention since the 1980s* (London: Verso, 2001).

ability to manoeuvre in international art circles to questions the myth and memories empowering the national constructs of Israel and Palestine.

Entering the powerful authoritative world of galleries, dealers, auction houses, museums and collectors is one way to gain a wide audience. For Sabella, being aware of art market politics is necessary in order to increase audience participation in deconstructed myths of Palestine.

This critique as an adult began early, having grown up in an increasingly dissatisfied Palestinian society and only twelve years old when the First Intifada (1987 – 1993) erupted.³⁰⁷ Disillusioned with notions of Arab unity and aid, ‘the uprising demonstrated decades of humiliation and fierce repression of the native population by the Israeli colonial project’³⁰⁸, Sabella resented and rejected this attempt to create singular, ‘imagined totalities’:

He rebelled and, instead, fashioned for himself a fictional (or hyper-) identity, located in the liminal space between belonging and not belonging. Whilst this permitted him to move freely across the city with his camera, it ultimately engendered an unshakable feeling of alienation. To visually illustrate – and mitigate - this sense of disaffection, or ‘mental exile’, has been in the forefront of Sabella’s practice since his emergence as an artist in the mid-1990s.³⁰⁹

³⁰⁷ The First Intifada (1987 – 1993) marked the first time in which Palestinians took it upon themselves, without the call for assistance from the international community, to demand their rights. It was ‘violently countered’ by the Israeli authorities, killing over 1,000 Palestinians, and over 100 Israelis died. What was ironic about this Intifada, was as well as having a common ‘enemy’, the Israeli usurping authorities, there was tension amongst the Palestinian community to fish out collaborators with the Israeli state. Thus, the several communities of the blanket term Palestine were starting to be fragmented, with increasing importance placed on religious, political and national affiliations. Identity as defined by religion, national allegiance, and political and sectarian domination were to become evermore important in a chaotic fissuring society where the craze to track down ‘traitors’ of the cause reached unprecedented heights, causing Palestinians to spy and even kill each other.

³⁰⁸ Christa Paula, The Empty Quarter Gallery, ‘Euphoria and Beyond: A Solo Exhibition by Steve Sabella at the Empty Quarter Gallery Dubai May 2 – June 11’, <<http://www.theemptyquarter.com/newsletters/Beyond%20Euphoria-Christa%20Paula.pdf>> [Accessed 4 December 2014].

³⁰⁹ Paula, The Empty Quarter Gallery, ‘Euphoria and Beyond: A Solo Exhibition by Steve Sabella at the Empty Quarter Gallery Dubai May 2 – June 11’.

The exilic character of Sabella's oeuvre is therefore not simply based on his alienation from his lands of origin, nor on the lack of status it or he as its quasi-citizen has, but rather in finding himself in exile even amongst people who are supposedly of his own 'kind', of what Paul Ilie calls 'inner exile'³¹⁰. When in the presence of the majority Muslim Palestinian community, Sabella's sense of alienation increased, as he was always questioned how he could be 'Palestinian' with a name like Steve Sabella.³¹¹ As I will show below, even his art avoided using circulating visual signs.

Faced with the double pressures of identitarian politics, Sabella's visual vocabulary steers away from portraying experiences of 'Palestinians' in their identitarian garb, which necessitated the circulation of their image as solely victims of Israeli oppression. Like Darwish, Sabella, in addition to questioning what or where Palestine is, is also concerned with challenging prevalent and reductive media representations of Palestine and Palestinians. When I asked him why he doesn't photograph the violence of occupation, he replied, 'I will leave it to others'³¹².

This leads us to start analysing his photography in light of the different forms of resistance it exhibits against first, the Israeli occupation, founded on memories of scriptural promises to the Children of Israel by God; and second, the global art market which, like the global literary market, relies on 'myths and stereotypes' that drive forms of consumption premised on the 'urge to identify' (an urge essential to exoticism), which 'often comes at the expense of *knowledge* of cultures/cultural groups other than one's own''³¹³; third, the pre-defined and singular cultural

³¹⁰ Paul Ilie, *Literature and Inner Exile: Authoritarian Spain, 1939-1975* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1980).

³¹¹ Steve Sabella, 'Dare to Question My Identity or Where I Come From', *YouTube* video recording, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=26430T-Kyk0>> [accessed 10 May 2014].

³¹² Sabella, Private conversation, 19 May 2016.

³¹³ Brouillette, *Postcolonial Writers*, p. 16.

constructs of Palestine and Palestinians; and lastly symbols of collective identities which proliferate in all the three mentioned above.

In order to battle against these forms of hegemony and traditions, Sabella locates the memories which these authorities are based on. In doing so, he depopulates his photographs of memories which perpetuate the violence by recirculating constructs of an 'imagined totality'.

Visual images of biblical sites and the Israeli occupation

Before photography of the Middle East emerged, a long tradition of European material and visual arts depicting the 'Holy Land' was already in existence. For example, Crusader art of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries 'was meant to identify and glorify the holy places and to serve the pilgrims who came there'³¹⁴. Even further back in time, Christian Rome attempted to incorporate images of Jerusalem in its material and visual cultures.³¹⁵ By the time photography had developed, it initially came to the Middle East with Western pilgrims needing to provide truthful, iconic images of the 'Holy Land' in order to confirm the Bible's truth³¹⁶.

³¹⁴ Jaroslav Folda, *Crusader Art in the Holy Land: From the Third Crusade to the Fall of Acre, 1187-1291* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 512. For more on art of the Crusades see Katja Boertjes, 'The Reconquered Jerusalem Represented: Tradition and Renewal on Pilgrimage Ampullae from the Crusader Period', pp. 169-189; and Hanneke van Asperen, 'As if they had physically visited the holy places': Two Sixteenth-century Manuscripts Guide a Mental Journey through Jerusalem (Radboud University Library, Mss 205 and 233)', pp. 190-214; both in *Imagined and Real Jerusalem in Art and Architecture*, ed. by Jeroen Goudeau, Mariëtte Verhoeven, Wouter Weijers (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

³¹⁵ Sible de Blaauw, 'Translations of the Sacred City Between Jerusalem and Rome', in *Imagined and Real Jerusalem in Art and Architecture*, ed. by Jeroen Goudeau, Mariëtte Verhoeven, Wouter Weijers (Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 136-165.

³¹⁶ Stephanie Stidham Rogers, 'American Protestants and Palestine', in *Inventing the Holy Land: American Protestant Pilgrimage to Palestine, 1865-1941* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011), p. 52. Issam Nassar studies the image of the Jerusalem city-scape in the early photography of Palestine. For more on this see Issam Nassar, *Photographing Jerusalem: The Image of the City in Nineteenth-Century Photography* (Boulder: East European Monographs, 1997), pp. 25-30.

After the invention of the daguerrotype (1839), a rush of visitors came to document those same biblical sites for themselves. Thus the image of Palestine remained an imagined one, mediated through scriptural narratives and biblical memories. Depictions of lands associated with biblical narratives moved from the sole sphere of theologians and travellers to historians, relegating Palestine's significance to the singular importance of its relationship to religious narratives.

Given the fact that photography of Palestine emerged at a time of European colonial expansion, it was inevitable that photography was to become a tool to depict, justify and articulate the colonial projects of European powers.³¹⁷ The space of Palestine was turned into an ideologically constructed space. When Zionist travellers came to document the land, their photographs were used to formulate the Zionist myth: images of the land were taken showing Zionists ploughing the countryside, promoting the perceived benefits of Zionist control of Palestinian lands.³¹⁸ Contributing to the creation of a culture of myths and memories, Zionist photography later became a cultural tool by supporters of an Israeli state.

Thus, as a form of counter-hegemony, early forms of resistance to the Israeli occupation and campaign of obliteration were supported by visual imagery, and as such strongly influenced the history of photography in Palestine. Beginning as a form of social documentary repertoire and a mode of self-representation in defense of Palestinian existence, the first Palestinian photographer, Khalil Ra'ad, set up his own studio in Jerusalem in 1890. Rather than focus on cityscapes and monuments, Ra'ad's photographic subjects were ordinary people going about their daily tasks, streets not

³¹⁷ Issam Nassar, 'Photography as Source Material for Jerusalem's Social History', in *Transformed Landscapes: Essays On Palestine and the Middle East in Honor of Walid Khalidi*, ed. by Leila Tarazi Fawaz, Walid Khalidi, and Kamil Mansur (Cairo; New York: American University in Cairo Press, 2009), p. 138.

³¹⁸ Ruth Owen, 'Zionist Photography, 1910-41: constructing a landscape', *History of Photography*, 19.3 (1995), pp. 201-9.

desolate but bustling with people, craftsmen carrying their loads, workers stacking Nablus soap bars and villagers at work in the olive fields. Documenting folkloric and ethnic scenes this way acted as a counter narrative to the one being dispersed by the Zionists and colonial European travellers.

These materials were hidden after 1948 to suppress the representation of a people termed 'Palestinian'. But such an attempt was like trying to plughole an oceanic tide. A rich collection of materials that have eluded destruction are photographs that document Palestinians and their society.³¹⁹ For example, helping to construct a national narrative, photographs of the Nakba have become 'a Palestinian event and a site of Palestinian collective memory'³²⁰ in a wider intellectual endeavor to produce knowledge pertaining to a pre-1948 Palestinian existence, and to document Palestinian resistance to the creation of the state of Israel. Books of photographs combined with testimonial account include *Jaffa the Perfume of a City*, Sara Graham-Brown's *The Palestinians and Their Society 1880-1946*³²¹ and *Before Their Diaspora: A Photographic History of the Palestinians 1876-1948* by Walid Khalidi³²² are examples.

By concretizing the event in memory, these scholars have managed to save themselves from 'alienation and self-estrangement'³²³. Thus, these 'books of memory [...] gain significance because they aim to preserve some kind of pure or intact

³¹⁹ Part of the Arab Studies Society, founded in 1979 in East Jerusalem, is the Document Centre which holds a large collection of photography of Palestine and Palestinians. For more on the photography collection here see Nur Masalha, *Palestine Nakba*, p. 146.

³²⁰ Ahmad H. Sa'di, 'Catastrophe, Memory and Identity: Al-Nakbah as a Component of Palestinian Identity', *Israel Studies*, 7.2 (2002), p. 177.

³²¹ Sara Graham-Brown, *Palestinians and their Society 1880-1946: A Photographic Essay* (London: Quartet, 1980).

³²² Walid Khalidi, *Before Their Diaspora: A Photographic History of the Palestinian 1876-1948* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1984).

³²³ Ahmad H. Sa'di, 'Catastrophe, Memory and Identity', p. 184.

past'³²⁴. The function of photography in these cases thus becomes one which aims to fossilise an idealised memory to project a more positive outlook on the future.³²⁵

Images surrounding the conflict in Palestine circulating in media outlets do not serve to complicate images of Palestine or its inhabitants. Memories of the past still dictate how images are reproduced and consumed. In order to resist the colonisation of the imagination by memory, Sabella transgresses the binaries prevalent in historical documentation of Palestinians and Palestine in colonial European, Zionist, Israeli, Palestinian and global visual media cultures.

Without miscontextualising sites of national and biblical memories, draining the space of its inhabitants, or narrating a collective national identity through customs and traditions, Sabella fashions a reconstructed, demythologised 'shift from ubiquitous views of 'Nostalgia''³²⁶ and shows a less sentimental and emotional set of images surrounding the debate over the lands of Israel and Palestine. In the photographs reproduced below, the subject of identity of the land is simultaneously avoided and emphasised in a challenging way.

This more critical approach is true for Palestinian art photography in general after the Oslo Accords of 1993.³²⁷ Along with the increased building of settlements, the building of the Wall, many Palestinians from the Diaspora returned to the West

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

³²⁵ Issam Nassar, 'Familiar Snapshots: Representing Palestine in the Work of the First Local Photographers' in *History and Memory*, 18.2 (2006), pp. 139-155 is another scholarly attempt to 'draw attention to a number of photographers who have so far been ignored and, almost more importantly, to carve a place in the history of photography in Palestine for what I have called a local photographic tradition', *Ibid.*, p. 152.

³²⁶ 'SETTLEMENT - Six Israelis & One Palestinian' International Gallerie Magazine, 2009 <http://stevesabella.com/settlement.html>

³²⁷ For more on Palestinian politics after Oslo, please see Nathan J. Brown, *Palestinian Politics After the Oslo Accords: Resuming Arab Palestine* (Berkeley, CA; London: University of California Press, 2003) and Geoffrey R. Watson, *The Oslo Accords: International Law and the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Agreements* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). Boullata also dedicates a chapter to art being produced as a result of the tensions being built up in response to the failure of the 1993 Oslo peace accords. See Boullata, *Palestinian Art*, pp. 277-287.

Bank. Simultaneously, this came with new relatively relaxed Israeli travel restrictions on Western-passport holding Palestinians from the Diaspora, the withdrawal of Israeli military control over urban Palestinians' daily life and a heightened interest for all things Palestinian. The establishment of foreign news agencies in Jerusalem, the establishment of visual arts and cinema festivals as well as exhibitions on Palestine in Europe, influx of foreign donor funds and the opening of several arts and cultural establishments such as galleries and centres³²⁸ in the West Bank, as well as the establishment of art competition awards were soon to follow.³²⁹ This newfound cultural engagement with global flows of capital and the tunneling of Palestinian culture and identity outside its immediate borders³³⁰ meant a need to move away from the representations of an 'imagined totality' of Palestinian people, rooted in the nation-state paradigm, a

representational paradigm in contemporary Palestinian culture: The abandonment of previous political problematics for a centering on the individual's private mythology: The body, memory, experiences of the individual, where the political/ collective is mediated through individual experience. Specifically, revolutionary or romanticised representations were replaced by irony, self criticism, the exploration of subaltern identities, nihilism, and self narration.³³¹

Since memory plays an intrinsic part in cultural dynamics, cultural identities can only continue and be preserved if memories are reshuffled in words, images and objects.

³²⁸ Adila Laïdi-Hanieh, 'Arts, identity, and survival: Building cultural practices in Palestine', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 35.4 (2006), pp. 28-43.

³²⁹ For more on the art scene in Palestine and Israel see Carla Baum, 'Palestinian and Israeli Art Scenes: Grasping the Differences', *Palestine-Israel Journal of Politics, Economics & Culture*, 20/21.4/1 (2015), pp.164-166.

³³⁰ Michael Walling, 'Achilles Comes to Palestine: Border Crossings' *This Flesh is Mine*, *New Theatre Quarterly*, 31.3 (2015), pp.252-262.

³³¹ Laïdi-Hanieh, 'Palestinian Landscape Photography', p. 120.

Yet, if artists want to challenge the narrow definitions and projections of cultural identities, then a battle must first be played out with memories. Thus, imaginings of collective identities can only be interrogated if the individual is represented without reference to reiterated and circulating symbols. As Petersen has demonstrated in her article on the identity politics inherent in the global artworld, there is a need to

disentangle the understanding of ‘cultural identity’ of individual artists from the emphasis on national and ethnic identities at work in the current political discourses in the West and in institutional multiculturalism³³².

Avoiding using visual symbols which may lead to a reading of his work based on national and ethnic identities, Sabella’s *Search* engages in the new call for an aesthetics to depict more than representations of the land and stereotypical people; the photographs in this series also include figuration or depictions of individuals, which are conscious photographic attempts to narrate the political through the lens of the individual subject. However, unlike Laïdi-Hanieh’s argument that

Palestine [sic] photography is still very much in the direct exposing mode, not the introspective, ironic or self criticism [sic] mode of literature, cinema and other visual arts³³³

I will argue in the following that Sabella’s photography critically engages with the construction and articulation of the land. He has abandoned simplistic representations of the land, to more nuanced readings of the Palestinian landscape.

Photography after His-memory: counter-imaging Palestine

³³² Petersen, ‘Identity Politics’, p. 204.

³³³ Laïdi-Hanieh, ‘Palestinian Landscape Photography’, p. 121.

In order to understand how Sabella resists the reductive images of Palestine and Palestinians, through framing the photographic image with text confirming an ‘imagined totality’ of ethnicity or nationalism, I will turn to look at Sabella’s photographic series *Search* (1997). The photograph below is untitled, does not show any landmarks of Jerusalem, nor its ‘characteristic’ people, nor give any other indication of where the place may be in terms of road signs, or otherwise ‘just’ natural landscape.



Figure 2.1
 Steve Sabella
Untitled
 ‘Search’ series
 1997
 13 x 20.5 cm
 Black and white infrared photograph

The images steer the viewer into depopulated landscapes beyond its city walls, offering glimpses of harsh beauty and superficially integrated alien objects. Light, in different spectra, is significant and is utilised to create an imaginary reality, a promise of relief in a world beyond the visible. The yearning for escape is

palatable. Importantly, these early works incorporate aspects of fragmentation and re-assembly as well as the digital manipulation of the photographic image, prescient of Sabella's mature formal vocabulary. [His works] focus on Jerusalem and comprise a thorough investigation of the dialectic between place and perception.³³⁴

Search is comprised of black-and-white infrared images. In them, Sabella shows us no pictorial signification of Israel's occupation, prevalent in the images by global media giants such as CNN, Fox, BBC and Aljazeera. Unlike Darwish's early voice of infuriation, Sabella's first images are serene, showcasing images of natural beauty from Palestine, photographing trees, branches and natural landscapes.

I suggest that Sabella wanted to show how the beauty of the natural land has been sterilised by the Israeli occupation. As the image is emptied of visual clichés, we are presented with a nostalgic scenery of lifeless nature, a paradox recurrent with the state Palestinians live in within the Occupied Territories and Israel. A friend once suggested that these trees are in fact solitary figures, representing people. If we are to assume that these trees are in fact representative of people, it could be suggested that the singular trees depicted indicate a desire to be alone and outside the framework of identitarian collectivities which discourses of the global depend on. The solitariness also suggests abandonment, as if beyond the reach of memories.

In not portraying memories, Sabella does not depict a 'documentation of a vanishing rural Jerusalem'³³⁵. His images are always staged, fictionalised and distant, to deconstruct traditional nostalgic approaches to land, homeland, nation, and self. This goes against what architects Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti observed:

³³⁴ Paula, The Empty Quarter Gallery, 'Euphoria and Beyond: A Solo Exhibition by Steve Sabella at the Empty Quarter Gallery Dubai May 2 – June 11'.

³³⁵ Laïdi-Hanich, 'Palestinian Landscape Photography', p. 121.

Palestine was overdetermined by media images of a landscape of violence and destruction that obliterates the reality and voices of the people themselves.³³⁶

Sabella works his way around this. To complicate the hegemony of media images of violence and destruction, Sabella taps into the very epistemological frameworks that enable such images of violence and destruction to circulate and perpetuate. Sabella's photography is a visual transformation of Palestine where earlier, historical images in film and literature constructed a

fundamental expressive form in the creation of national icons such as [...] national symbols from the natural landscape of Palestine such as the olive tree and the orange grove.³³⁷

Although mostly relevant to Sabella's early photography, images of the land are profuse in his artistic expression. His engagement with the Palestinian landscape takes suggests that his art is undivided from his immediate environment and political realities. It is essential for this approach to impose the political status quo of Palestine on the art works. But at the same time once should understand how the visual images of Sabella's art communicate resistance against established modes of expression and pressures to create works of art which can be identifiable and thus institutionalised.

Search is where Sabella is nostalgically searching for that land, now buried under the debris of conflict. All the images are of natural objects: trees, leaves, rocks, wild marshes, a flower and leaves. There are also images of what seems to be abandoned spaces. The images are pervaded with nostalgic solitariness: the image of

³³⁶Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti quoted in Jean Fisher, 'Voices in the Singular Plural: 'Palestine c/o Venice' and the Intellectual Under Siege', *Third Text*, 23. 6 (2009), p. 789-801.

³³⁷Rasha Salti, 'From Resistance and Bearing Witness to the Power of the Fantastical: Icons and Symbols in Palestinian Poetry and Cinema', *Third Text*, 24. 1 (2010), p. 39.

the flower looks almost lonely, as do those of all the trees. Adding diversity to this singularity the series includes images of fields, with much detail: the texture of the grass, the play of light and darkness, shadows, the texture of the rocks and bricks as well as the teasing occasional feature of a human figure or hand. Looking pathetic, these inanimate objects form part of the photographer's search for an alternative, self-constructed world.

In using infrared photography, the photographer is looking for the hidden reality behind the visible. Escaping from the horrors of his own reality as a Palestinian, there seems to be a search for the hidden homeland, far and distant from the existing space which he inhabits. This homeland is constructed from the existing one, but those same images are taken out of their context, in an attempt at spatial neutrality. There is also something quite claustrophobic about these images though. Many of them are of enclosed spaces, or of images indicating confinement and enclosure.



Figure 2.2
Steve Sabella

Untitled
 'Search' series
 1997
 Black and white infra red photograph
 13 x 20.5 cm

The image of the grill in the photograph is iconic because it portrays what was photographed. This iconic image indexically points to the idea that something is being shut off, or enclosed. This then creates further symbolic connotations of a political siege or imprisonment, such as that imposed on Palestinians by the Israeli occupation, or a mental siege that may have been imposed on one by tradition or dogma. In this particular series, we are told that '[Sabella] resented the social pressure caused by the religious denominations that strove to convert an individual's religious affiliation into a national one'³³⁸. The siege for Sabella goes beyond the physical siege iconically represented in the image, to become a symbolic metaphor for the socio-political siege he finds himself in within the city of Jerusalem.

Not just an index for a prison, the grill can also function as a symbol for the imprisonment of the landscape within larger sites of fossilised cultural memory. The rock in the image is shown behind a dark background, with the grill overlaying it also black. This could indicate the effort to capture the 'light' and the possibility for the land to be liberated from mediated memories which are selected and reorganised to produce historical truths and presents. These memories develop and continue cultural identities which can become extremely exclusive and lead to antagonism and violence as groups with alternative memories find themselves shunned from the enclosed 'imagined totalities'.

The memory of the 'imagined totality' of the historical communities of Palestine could be represented as protected by the grill. As ancient heritage is used in

³³⁸ Steve Sabella, 'Statement' <<http://stevesabella.com/search.html>> [accessed 15th August 2013].

narratives of cultural memory, with objects sometimes protected in the museum space. Here Sabella is showing us an alternative way to protect heritage through staging visual productions of the landscape, where there are already attempts to preserve heritage and cultural identity. Thus, this particular image could be read in two ways: it could either be a critique of the colonisation of the image and heritage by various political hegemonic factions – as Pamuk discusses and Khedairi characterises through the figure of Abu Ghayib - or it could be read as a deconstructive way of thinking about cultural memory and heritage without making the geopolitical location clear.

As the photographs in this series avoid any direct reference to Palestine or Jerusalem, Sabella is responding to the problematic visual representations of the Palestinian landscape. Despite the fact that Sabella was attempting to build his ‘new world’³³⁹, he does so using shrapnelled images from the actual landscape of Palestine. Just as Darwish wants to build a Palestinian homeland from rubble in his poetry, in which poetic beauty (the rose) must grow from the fists of people who struggle to achieve a political liberation, as discussed in the previous Chapter, so is Sabella still photographing scenes in Palestine, while notably avoiding clichés and scenes which correspond to cultural memory.

Sabella tries to formulate a new visual vocabulary in his next series ‘Identity’ produced five years later in 2002. No longer using infra-red photography, but colour transparencies, the high resolution images are sharp and vivid in colour and detail. The sadness evident in the photographs of ‘Search’ is an extension of the collective pain of Israeli occupation. A progeny of historical images of Palestine, albeit without reference to a specified place, Sabella exhibits an attachment to the place. In ‘Identity’ he exhibits a hope without the shadows of reshuffled and articulated memories.

³³⁹ Steve Sabella, Artist statement, <<http://stevesabella.com/search.html>> [accessed 15th August 2013].

Although in the photographs a kind of solitude is to be found not completely unfamiliar to what is found in the 'Search' series, the brightness of the pictures is in contrast with the black and white images of 'Search', resulting in a hopeful tone. In Figure 2.3 one can find comfort in the clear blue sky that acts as a backdrop for a ladder resting against a naked tree.



Figure 2.3
Untitled
Steve Sabella
'Identity' series

2002
70 x 50 cm
Colour transparency

Looking at the images presented in the photograph semiotically, which are iconic, but also symbolic and indexical, there is a union between the visual-actual interpretant³⁴⁰ (what the viewer actually sees and interprets) and the intended interpretant (what the artist intended for the audience to see). Yet these visual icons – a tree and a ladder, symbolically point to a third index, a sign that is intended through the physicality of the photograph and the positioning of the photographic subjects.

In positioning the icons as if they are pointing towards the sky, there is the indexical sign that suggests that the photographer is looking beyond the immediate. In this photograph, a number of signs are used to communicate that the photographer is beyond the struggle of rooted memories which cultivates collective identities, possibly symbolically represented here by the tree and its various branches. The ladder symbolises a vehicle liberating one from memories, histories and mythical narratives and genealogies.³⁴¹ In climbing out of the trees' roots and into the sky of freedom, the ladder becomes a symbol for the constructive movement from a narrative of defined *roots*, to a narrative of planetary *routes*.

³⁴⁰ According to Peirce an interpretant of the sign is 'the *object* of the sign; the idea in the mind that the sign excites, which is a mental sign of the same object'. Peirce, *Essential Peirce*, p. 13.

³⁴¹ It may seem that the sky, usually associated with heaven in religious texts, it does not take that religious role in Sabella's works. In fact, Sabella refrains from any iconic imagery that may make reference to religion. This may in fact be part of his artistic oeuvre: to use icons that may indicate religion if combined with other icons. Rather, Sabella secularises religious symbols, and frees them from religious conventions.



Figure 2.4
 Steve Sabella
Untitled
 'Identity' series
 2002
 70 x 50 cm
 Colour transparency

Just like the mattress in the photograph above has been torn into shreds, Sabella's 'Identity' photographs call for a move away from constructions of a past utopia to face a dystopia of the present. Softness and comfort of childhood dreams are ripped into pieces; there is no place for unity and wholeness here. From here on, Sabella's photographic imagery is defined by constant pulls away from hegemonies of the memories of a bitter-sweet past.

Going against the nationalist grain



Figure 2.5

Installation Shot at Mathaf Museum, Qatar

Steve Sabella

Settlement: Six Israelis and One Palestinian

2008–2010

Mathaf, Museum of Modern Arab Art, Doha

230cm x 164 cm

Lightjet print on 5cm aluminum box edge

This work has been commissioned for the 2010-11 Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha, Qatar as part of the exhibition *Told / Untold / Retold* curated by Sam Bardaouil & Till Fellrath

Unlike the two series, photographs of which are shown above, Sabella's later photography becomes more confrontational with the issue of Israeli occupation. Using text to refer to the Palestinian issue rather than the visual image, Sabella exhibits a frustration with the politics of the region, and displays an inability to remain playfully ambiguous with textual signs as he previously did. This awareness that remaining neutral is impossible is discussed by Sam Bardaouil:

With this, [Sabella] wants us to realise that assuming any neutrality within the charged space that he has built is simply not feasible. We are forced to constantly

navigate from one side to the other to maintain a complete physical detachment. Paradoxically, constant action becomes the symbol for no action, a metaphor for an eternal state of exile.³⁴²

Just as Darwish was frustrated with Palestinian identity being in opposition to Israeli identity, Sabella is similarly questioning the dichotomous constructions of identity in Palestine and Israel. Looking at the images of the photographic installation of *Settlement* above, the figures are seen to stand outside a grey wall, indexically signifying the Iron Wall of Israel. This index could also symbolise nationalist-driven identity politics, where the figures standing *outside* the wall suggesting a transgression of both a physical and psychological boundary. This could lead to an assumption that the figures are in ideological exile. As boundaries are confused here, notions of ‘home’ (if the home lies behind the wall) and ‘exile’ (if we are to take the new space inside the walls as a place of exile) are blurred, nullifying nationalist tendencies to reduce people to either insiders or outsiders. As nationalist authoritative discourses depend on the appropriation of memory, Sabella is depopulating the visual image of charged cultural symbols that locate memories of a people within memories of a space.

In order to effectively divorce the image of individuals from the memories of collective identities and ‘imagined totalities’, it is only the title in this work which acts as a signifier to who the Israelis are and who is the Palestinian. The installation interrogates and challenges the common notions of identity, binary divisions, and even the English word ‘settlement’³⁴³ all rooted in memories.

³⁴² Sam Bardaouil, ‘The Transmodern Artist: The Use of Time as a Compositional Element in the Work of Contemporary Artists’, in *Told Untold Retold: 23 Journeys Through Time and Space* (Milan; Doha: Skira Editore, 2010), p. 45.

³⁴³ May it be noted that all, save one (*Kan ya Makan*), of Sabella’s works are titled and discussed by Sabella in English.

The word settlement could be used to denote: i. the illegal destruction of Palestinian homes and the building of Israeli settlements on those lands, ii. an agreement to settle the conflict, iii. a legal arrangement whereby property passes through a succession of people as dictated by the settlor, or iv. a subsidence of the ground or a structure built on it.

Conflating these different meanings of the word *settlement*, Sabella interrogates nationalist discourses which affirm the one group's right to sovereignty, preferring a peace deal which confronts the injustices of land confiscation and human torture. Regardless of the fact that Palestinian and Israeli identities are often noted to be binaries, the exposure of the mythical legacies that construct a collective identification collapses such apparent 'dichotomies'. Sabella engages in a discourse of identity politics which is more complex than state rhetoric demands. There is a common humanity to the two, devoid of violence and military prowess.

Instead of using symbols relating to preconceived memories of aggression, Sabella constantly challenges and debates ideologically and socially devised paradigms of visual signs: when dressed, the human body is being covered in clothes which designate symbolic meaning.³⁴⁴ Even when not dressed in traditional attire, and the choices of dress which we make inevitably denote a culturally framed projection of the self, dictated to the public by the fashion industry, religion and ethnicity.

The images show us human beings liberated from the confines and definitions which apparel necessarily communicates, as such constructing memories of imagined identities. These memories of collectivities based on dress and other cultural signifiers circulate in society and orient perceptions of individuals based on memories of

³⁴⁴ Fashion statements and ways of dressing and undressing the body construct and reproduce cultural paradigms. For more on dress as carriers of symbolic codes, see Malcolm Barnard, 'Fashion Statements: Communication and Culture', in *Fashion Theory: A Reader*, ed. by Malcolm Barnard (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 170-181.

‘imagined totalities’. By undressing the body we are moving on to the deconstruction of fashion traditions, which rely on reconfigurations of cultural memories, and look solely at human existence.

In reversing traditions and memories of collective identities, Sabella is resisting the projection of collectivity onto individuals, which deny the individual the right to frivolity and apoliticisation. In other words, in addition to top-down processes of belonging to an imagined national community through ‘the creation of national cultural canons and national heroes’³⁴⁵, there is also a bottom-up system working in tandem with it which exists separate to national institutions, archives and sentiments, and is expressed in the “‘restoration of the individual’s subjectivity’”³⁴⁶. It is the individual which finds itself at the centre of this system, rather than the metanarrative of the nation. By using the memory of individuals to stitch together a larger national discourse, Sabella distorts attempts of identity construction through manipulation of collective memories.

Precisely because the larger totality cannot be used to define the individual, Sabella exposes the arbitrariness of the relationship between symbolised national identity and the icon of the individual. It is not just the act of naming that is arbitrary and coincidental, it is moreover the visual signifier of ‘Palestinian-ness’ that is also arbitrary. Such signifiers of the Palestinian include the checked scarf *kufiyya* which is a symbolic aspect of Palestinian material culture. The signifier of the *kufiyya*, black and white checked fabric worn on the head, for example signifies Palestinian national

³⁴⁵ Ahmad H. Sa’di, ‘Catastrophe, Memory and Identity: Al-Nakbah as a Component of Palestinian Identity’ in *Israel Studies*, 7.2 (2002), p. 176.

³⁴⁶ Sai’di, ‘Catastrophe, Memory and Identity’, p. 176.

identity.³⁴⁷ It in turn signifies a concept purely abstract. Images of Yasser Arafat, the former leader of the PLO, always wearing the *kufiyya* have served to reinforce this signification.

Because memories use objects as well as words to perpetuate and develop cultural identities, the *kufiyya* is also adopted by Israelis to claim cultural authenticity and relationship with the land of Palestine.³⁴⁸ Material culture is thus appropriated by negotiators in the fields of nationalist discourse which have robbed the object of its neutrality. Now it is firmly positioned within an ideological framework to give credibility to one paradigm against another. Even Darwish's early poem 'Identity Card' uses the national motif of the *kufiyya* in the line 'there is a *kufiyya* above an 'iqal on my head'³⁴⁹ to declare the existence of a community that tries to construct itself through cultural codes such as dress.

Just as Darwish strips his later poetry of nationalist images and symbols, Sabella strips the bodies of his photographic subjects of the historical accidents which have created the association of Palestinianness with the *kufiyya* to generate meaning outside the sign-signifier-signified triangle.³⁵⁰ He deconstructs this triangle of sign, signified and signifier by stripping it from signifiers that symbolise ideology, ethnicity, nationality or race.

³⁴⁷ Loren D. Lybarger, *Identity and Religion in Palestine: The Struggle Between Islamism and Secularism in the Occupied Territories* (Princeton, N.J.; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 24.

³⁴⁸ Eric Silverman, 'Straps, Fringes, Snails, and Shawls', in *A Cultural History of Jewish Dress* (London; New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 156-7.

³⁴⁹ Mahmoud Darwish, 'Bitaqat Huwiyya', <<http://www.adab.com/modules.php?name=Sh3er&doWhat=shqas&qid=64761>> [accessed 11 November 2014], l. 42.

³⁵⁰ Kilbum Kim, 'Where Some See Fashion, Others See Politics', *The New York Times*, 11 February 2007, section Fashion & Style/ Fashion Show <<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/11/fashion/shows/11KAFFIYEH.html>> [accessed 30 November 2012]. This article is particularly interesting to note how a piece of fabric is locked in a system of meaning generation, used to signify the Palestinian national identity. In an interview, Sabella has noted how problematic it is to be locked within a sign system, especially in the Palestinian case.



Figure 2.6

Portrait of one of the six Israelis

Steve Sabella

Settlement: Six Israelis and One Palestinian

2008-2010

Mathaf, Museum of Modern Arab Art, Doha

230cm x 164 cm

Lightjet print on 5cm aluminum box edge

This work has been commissioned for the 2010-11 Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha, Qatar as part of the exhibition *Told / Untold / Retold* curated by Sam Bardaouil & Till Fellrath

The absence of culturally significant realia attests to cultural materials' involvement in a 'hyperreal' (a 'model of the real without origin or reality'³⁵¹), construction of identity. This hyperreal mimetic imitation without an origin has great implications for the role of cultural memory in selecting and mediating elements of the past to fashion a meaningful present. As material culture has an intrinsic connection to the signified notions of cultural identity, but these notions are rather arbitrarily associated, all national identities can be designated as hyperreal.

But Sabella does not stop here, as for him in this photographic installation, the hyperreal also implies very grave realities. Further complicating this relationship between the symbolic nature of the identified body and the term of identification of the 'Palestinian', is the fact that the actual subject which existed in real-time and space, referent or the 'physical thing' photographed, is Sabella the photographer himself, as shown in Figure 2.7.

³⁵¹ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 1.



Figure 2.7

Detail – Portrait of the Palestinian

Steve Sabella

Settlement: Six Israelis and One Palestinian

2008-2010

Mathaf, Museum of Modern Arab Art, Doha

230cm x 164 cm

Lightjet print on 5cm aluminum box edge

This work has been commissioned for the 2010-11 Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha, Qatar as part of the exhibition *Told / Untold / Retold* curated by Sam Bardaouil & Till Fellrath

The installation intricately plays with the symbolic relationship of the image of a man which the title signifies as being a Palestinian, and the iconic relationship of the referent of the image with the photographic installation. The image becomes at once a quasi-autobiographical installation, an image of the self which refrains from explicitly stating the iconic connection between the artist and the image, preferring instead to locate the self within a larger symbolic struggle between words and image. Although the hyperreal is rooted in imagination, there are instances where the hyperreal actually did exist in reality. On this particular notion of the actual existence of the photographed, Barthes states

In Photography I can never deny that *the thing has been* there. There is a superimposition here: of reality and of the past. And since this constraint exists only for Photography, we must consider it, by reduction, as the very essence, the *noeme* of Photography.³⁵²

Photography's essence or 'noeme' is precisely that the referent's existence cannot be denied. The subjects in the photographs are referents which must have existed in real space and time. Nonetheless, the condition of the referents' existence is contested. These real objects are necessarily fictionally staged. How the perceivers, both the executer of the image and the outside observer, construct the significance of the image of the real will therefore be artificial and subjective. The very act of framing an object is itself a manufactured construct; objects, things, places never exist in the way that they do in a photograph.

³⁵² Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (London: Vintage, 2000), pp. 76–7.

So although we cannot deny that the person existed in real space and time, the *conditions* in which that thing or person existed are indeed contested. How we come to *know* that thing or person is conditioned by the very medium of photography. Our knowledge of something that is depicted in a photograph is necessarily partial, incomplete, fragmented. What Barthes calls a ‘superimposition [of] the past and reality’, would be more accurately called a superimposition of a *part* of the past and reality.

The photographed bodies in *Settlement* did exist in reality. They were actually standing in that specific location, undressed and with neutral facial expressions. The reality could be a theatrical-fictional one, where the people consciously engage in an act of dramatizing something for a specific end, in this case possibly Israeli searches of Palestinians before crossing the Wall, or an actual one, where the bodies are found to be half naked.

This *personalisation* of globally and nationally constructed localities puts the individual in the centre of the tension field between global media representations and national narratives, both functioning as a result of mediated and reconstructed memories. What we are left with is not a confrontation between

members of “imagined totalities” [...] entities a priori separate and self-enclosed as well as holding antagonistic and principally irreconcilable interests locked in reciprocal competition and inclined to beget mutual hostility and suspicion³⁵³.

Hence, we are not left with ‘an anonymous and interchangeable, stereotyped specimen of an abstract category’ but rather with the picture of what could be a

³⁵³ Bauman, ‘Glocalization and hybridity’, p. 3.

‘personal friend or enem[y]’³⁵⁴. Thus, Sabella is not only challenging identity formulated by the nation-state, but also identity formulated by globally constructed signifiers of human identity. What we have is a play of words which suggest a nation-state, even though Palestine does not exist as a state, and a play of local or personal images.

This demonstrates that words and images can be products of cultural memory. It is on these grounds that Maggie Awadalla’s argument that poetry and painting are unified ‘not through subject and sign – but rather as an expression of the imagination’³⁵⁵ is refuted. It is precisely this idea of the ‘expression of the imagination’ which depends on signs. The difference between poetry and painting, or between word and image, is that in the former case the sign exists as a verbal construct, a word, whereas in the latter the sign is a visual construct, an image. In both cases, they switch back and forth from verbal to visual, and from visual to verbal to express this imagination. Hence, the imagination needs signs, both verbal and visual in nature, to ‘be’.

Going back to Sabella’s installation, the referents are real bodies which have been placed before the camera. Hence, they are real human beings. But there is no relationship between the iconic nature of the images of the referents and the verbal signifier. The photographs here complicate our reading of reality in the way that such ‘reality’ is constructed in the installation. Using verbal symbols to describe iconic images which themselves are free from signifying symbols, questions the whole signification process.

³⁵⁴ Bauman, ‘Glocalization and hybridity’, p. 3.

³⁵⁵ Maggie Awadalla, ‘Painter in Poetry/ Poet in Painting: The Language of Images in Experimental Poetry and in Adly Rizkallah’s Watercolors’, *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, 11 (1991), p. 155.

We can see how Barthes' experience of 'anguish of an uncertain filiation' is translated in this visual text. Sabella's association of the image with his 'self' is certainly 'uncertain'. Although it cannot be denied that the body photographed is his, there is a willingness to have this stated in the title, suggesting a process of 'othering'.

Barthes definition of photography as 'the advent of myself as other, a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity'³⁵⁶, offers an interesting way to think of how the installation generates meaning. Sabella has consciously chosen to disassociate his consciousness from identity in a complex way. Although the referent of the image cannot be refuted due to the iconic nature of photography, the signification of Sabella's consciousness is attested.

Resisting Memory of Trauma/ Trauma of Memory

One of the most widely circulated memories of collective trauma in global discourses is the Holocaust. It is an historical event that has been remembered, appropriated and representated at various levels in Western cultures, symbolizing the penultimate memory of collective suffering. Additionally, the Holocaust has been remembered and mythologised in Israeli policy. The reshuffling, reshaping and negotiation of the memory of this historical and collective trauma has been discussed profusely in academic circles.³⁵⁷ In the words of Robert S. Wistrich,

Israel as the guardian and heir of the Holocaust

³⁵⁶ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 12.

³⁵⁷ Jennifer Hansen-Glucklich, *Holocaust Memory Reframed: Museums and the Challenges of Representation* (New Brunswick; New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2014); Eran Neuman, *Shoah Presence: Architectural Representations of the Holocaust* (Farnham, Surrey; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014); Janet Jacobs, *Memorializing the Holocaust: Gender, Genocide and Collective Memory* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010); Andrea Liss, *Trespassing Through Shadows: Memory, Photography and the Holocaust* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

memory has steadily gained ground as a new unifying myth, alongside religion and nationalism. Paradoxically, as the distance from the traumatic event itself has increased so too have the trends towards mythologizing it – whether from a secular or a religious standpoint³⁵⁸

As I have demonstrated so far, scriptural and nationalist myths have been challenged in the photography of Sabella. In addition to this, another form of hegemony is the memory of the Holocaust, which has become a selective, organised cultural negotiation of a historical event. This cultural negotiation, which is projected from the present, reconfigures past events to become useful and meaningful in the present. In the words of Idith Zertal ‘the Holocaust and its millions of deaths have been ever-present in Israel from the day of its establishment and the link between the two events remains indissoluble’³⁵⁹. Thus, the death of six million Jews has turned from historical event into a negotiated cultural memory, circulating in cultural and political discourses.

Sabella installation interrogates the transformation from event to memory to culture, by playing on the word ‘six’, titling his work ‘Six Israelis and One Palestinian’. The visual icons of six men on side of the installation become the signified for the signifying words ‘six Israelis’. The role of photography in shaping cultural and collective memory is unraveled as the works denote how the Holocaust has become a defining ‘event’ shaping the creation of a politically independent state of Israel.

³⁵⁸ Robert S. Wistrich, ‘Israel and the Holocaust Trauma’, *Jewish History*, 11.2 (1997), p. 19.

³⁵⁹ Idith Zertal, ‘Introduction’, in *Israel’s Holocaust and the Politics of Nationhood* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 3.

The role of the archive cannot be under-estimated as cultural projects both home and abroad have taken up the Jewish suffering in the twentieth century as a symbol for global ethnic cleansing.

Norman Finkelstein has been a particularly active supporter of the view that the Holocaust was exaggerated to serve the Zionist project of colonisation and settlement in Palestine.³⁶⁰ Whether or not this is true is not what is at the heart of Sabella's works, rather his art opens up the debate as to the psychological repercussions of the Holocaust and the trauma of memory which has created a culture of paranoia within Israel. This paranoia has meant that Israel, despite being a powerful state, still fears the outnumbered Palestinian who, despite taking part in active armed struggle, is relatively weak.³⁶¹

One only has to look at the ratio of Palestinian to Israeli casualties to see Israel's military might. In using the ratio 6:1 there is a visual realisation that the Palestinian is outnumbered, that the paranoia is unfounded. All subjects look helpless, like 'adult-infants'³⁶², but what is interesting is that the similarity of their dress treats each individual as an uncanny part of a collective. This is especially so for the Israelis who are lined up on one side of the wall, resulting in a physical experience in which there is no room to take the *individuality* of each person into account. Sabella artistically tries to deal with this paranoia on both the side of the Palestinians and on

³⁶⁰ Norman G. Finkelstein, *The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering* (London; New York: Verso, 2003).

³⁶¹ It must be noted that paranoia as a term has been avoided in Israeli discourses until very recently. Other terms have been preferred such as 'siege mentality' in Daniel Bar-Tal and Dikla Antebi, 'Beliefs about Negative Intensions of the World: A Study of the Israeli Siege Mentality', *Political Psychology*, 13.4 (1992), pp. 633-45. Although there seems to be an attempt in this study to locate Israeli psychological approaches to Palestinians, the writer does not refrain from stating that 'the terroristic attacks on Israeli Jews and Jews in general by Palestinian organisations' have contributed to 'Israelis Jews [...] belief that the rest of the world is against them', p. 635.

³⁶² Sabella, 'Interview for a German Magazine' <<http://stevesabella.com/settlement%20-interview-question-and-answer-session.pdf>> [accessed 10 September 2013].

the side of the Israelis, projecting the psychological make-up on both sides of the conflict.

Just like Darwish's poetic voice tells the soldier that he would have remembered his mother in the gas chamber³⁶³, so too is Sabella trying to construct an image of human suffering divorced from canonised and institutionalised photographic images of the Holocaust where the textual narratives that frame the photographs designate memories of Jewish suffering in the 1930s and 1940s. Like Darwish, Sabella is constructing a photographic image that distorts and interrogates historical metanarratives. Through playing with icons and symbols, he is challenging how

science and popular culture have played a vital role in shaping historical, geographical, political, and cultural identities and identifications. As a product of science, the camera, for example, acquired an ethnographic aura, actively producing knowledge about non-European spaces.³⁶⁴

Creating a new photography which questions these constructs of identity, Sabella creates a space where the outer walls are the grey walls of the photographs. In front of these walls we see the photographic subjects, separated by a corridor where bodily interaction with the images can take place. This creates a visual and physical space to question the cultural identifications processed by memory games. Unlike the actual Wall constructed by Israel, which encourages forgetfulness of one memory, and consolidation of another, the installation brings to the forefront that these people exist as individuals before their appropriation by myths of the Holocaust, nationalism and scriptural narratives. As Sabella informs us,

³⁶³ Darwish, *State of Siege*, p. 130.

³⁶⁴ Ella Shohat, *Taboo Memories, Diasporic Voices*, (London; Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), pp. xix - xx.

the wall segments in the art installation unite together to form another massive wall, psychological reactions are perhaps unavoidable. For decades we live on the same land, yet, ironically we are ignorant of each other. It is as if, we live on foreign lands. Israelis manage to disregard the millions of Palestinians living on the other side, especially by the construction of the Separation Wall. Artificial hills are built to hide it, and sometimes it is painted in the color of the land to disguise it. But can one really ignore who lives behind that Wall?³⁶⁵

The Wall physically separating the Palestinian Territories and Israel recreates a psychological barricade, stops the two sides from coming together at the negotiation table. As such the fence becomes deeply entrenched in psychological complexes of confusion, paranoia and suspicion on both sides. Because neither can physically see the other, a mental blockade has taken place where mythical constructs fueled by memory games fill the vast expanse of emptiness. *Settlement* as such becomes a physical space of a settlement for Palestinians and Israelis to co-occupy as *individuals*, a space in which they must come to terms with collective paranoia, state propaganda and ideologically motivated cultural politics.

Summary

This Chapter has explored examples from three series of photographic works by Sabella. The discussion above has brought out various forms of resistance through a semiotic engagement with the images and words of the works. It has become apparent that Sabella, like Darwish, challenges the authoritative epistemes of global media images are impersonal, instead perpetuating the idea of self enclosed 'imagined

³⁶⁵ Sabella, *Zenith Magazine*, 2009 <<http://stevesabella.com/settlement-interview-zenith-magazine-2009.pdf>> [Accessed 10th September 2013].

totalities': the Israeli occupation which strips Palestinians of their basic rights; biblical narratives which have become a source of hegemony for the history of photography of Palestine; Palestinian and Israeli nationalist constructs of self enclosed identities enabling a reciprocal hostility between the two sides; and the official circulation of the memories of the Holocaust in present real cultural and political articulations.

What all these forms of authority have in common is that they rely on creating myths through regurgitating, recreating and reshuffling memories of the past. These memories are articulated in the present to very real effects.

Sabella's poetics of resistance of ideologically motivated memory articulations involves a variety of strategies involving carefully thought out treatments of word and image. In his photography he avoids making photographs similar to already circulating images, which correspond to a negotiated, reshuffled, re-mediated memory of stereotypes of people and land. In doing so he de-populates his images of clichéd symbols. In addition to this he uses photograph titles to toy with outdated memories and modes of thinking about the present using the past and as such displaces traditional aesthetic paradigms.

PART III

Word-image conflations

Introduction

This is a study on the productions of memory. I am primarily concerned with the discursive practices of memory, with its epistemes rather than its ontology. So far, the fields of interests studied in Parts I and II, which cover a great deal of ground addressed by memory, have included the novel, museology, painting and photography. I have illustrated that memory should not be taken as a given. Rather its conception in different historical and geographical contexts of Iraq and Palestine (and to a much lesser extent Turkey), has been addressed in order to understand its extraordinary discursive prominence today. I have shown how subjective and individual memories bear a complex relationship with collective and social memories, which is based on the primary difficulty of memory, namely how it negotiates between private and public space.

The first Part's theme has demonstrated that although memories of the individual are always working in a dialectical relationship with memories of collectivities, such as those of the nation-state and corporate institutions, the memories of the individual are at the same time rooted in a struggle for autonomy from these collectivist institutions.

My treatment of the novel *Absent*, through a crossreading with Orhan Pamuk's *Museum*, suggests that memories of the male individual are strongly determined by

state reconstructions and representations of a national, collective notion of memory. The novel responds to this by offering an alternative memory building process presented by a female character, in which she uses quotidian objects, far removed from the elitism of the nationally institutionalised art that her male counterpart collects.

Part II's theme continues along the lines of this struggle against the authoritarianism of institutionalised memory, but moves from the Iraqi context to that of Palestinian art, through annexing words and images from their traditional usage, and as such recycling and re-presenting scriptural and national narratives. As the chapters concerning Darwish's poetry and Sabella's photography suggest, the individual artist remains in the liminal space between expressing collective memory of struggle and individual memories of wanting to remain autonomous and frivolous. The resulting rebelliousness exhibits an unsettled tension between the hegemony of myths of memory in daily social and political life and contemporary individual needs for independence from memories.

The Part before you continues the theme of resistance moving back to the context of Iraq, but moves in time from the interwar sanction years, to the years post-2003 invasion. The toppling of Saddam Hussein in 2003 was accompanied by a deeply internalised engagement with mythical memories of the Arab despotic ruler, projected onto Saddam Hussein. In response to this hegemony of Western memories of the Arabic-speaking world, this Part will demonstrate how memories of Iraq and al-Andalus can blur the distinctions between word/image, past/present, reality/fiction, history/memory, individual/nation and subject/object.

In close readings of the paintings series 'Homage to Ibn Zaydun' (2010), in the proceeding Chapter it will become apparent that these dichotomies are blurred to

resist, i. global capitalism which has fuelled sectarian violence in Iraq since the invasion, and ii. the tendencies of the global art market to appropriate non-Western artists within a paradigm of Western modernity which depends on these binaries. The artist does so by using the culture and high civilisation of Arabs and the memory of al-Andalus. By exploring how images and memories of written text were violated, the sensation of a traumatic experience of memory is visually generated to produce a momentous encounter with violence of memory and history. As it will be argued, al-Nasiri is not concerned with reproducing the 'real' world, but is concerned with using visual icons as storehouses of memory to contemplate existential concerns.

4

POETIC METAPHYSICS IN RAFA AL-NASIRI'S 'HOMAGE TO IBN ZAYDUN'

Transcending word/image binaries

Al-Nasiri reimagines humanity and beauty through a nuanced and playful engagement with the memory of al-Andalus and high Arab civilisation, through the printing of Ibn Zaydun's 'qafiyya' poem – prepared for him by the Syrian calligrapher Salih Nasab – and printed on the canvases of the 'Homage to Ibn Zaydun' paintings. The works blur the dichotomies of word and image, and like other modern and contemporary Iraqi art produced in the diaspora, the forgotten memory of a utopian past is visually re-constructed in the works.³⁶⁶ Al-Nasiri reflects on and resists the general decay of living standards in post-wars Iraq, the gradual decline of fine art and its institutions, the heavy price that people have to pay as well as the wider environmental damage caused to the beautiful natural landscape within Iraq, and as such 'Homage' is a testament to metaphysical beauty in Arab cultural memory.

Al-Nasiri's series stages a negotiated form of resistance in many guises. It is a protest against corruption, death and the abandonment and destruction of culture. Al-Nasiri constructs a unique voice through selecting elements from various art traditions, to allow a form of resistance otherwise not possible in the circumstances of post-2003 Iraq. His employment of a variety of art practices, theories and philosophies to project an idealised image of a desired Iraq is one of the ways in which he develops a plural, planetary vision for Iraq's future. This nostalgia from the perspective of an imagined

³⁶⁶ Dia al-Azzawi (1939 -), Hana Malallah (1958 -), Ali Taleb (1944 -), Ghassan Ghaib (1964 -), Muhammad al-Shammari (1962 -) and Walid Sitti (1954 -) are just a handful of Iraqi artists living outside Iraq who remain faithful to a specifically Iraqi art discourse.

past - enabled through networks of memory - projects a vision of a more inclusive and pluralistic society for the future.

The tyranny of a singular vision of Iraqi identity

As explained above, al-Nasiri seeks to explore the multiple dimensions of human subjectivity. In doing so, he resists various forms of political hegemonies that, in various intricate ways, project singular and absolute manifestations of Iraqi identity. As twentieth and twenty-first century Iraqi politics are defined by a drive towards totalitarian control and a homogenous vision of Iraqi society, al-Nasiri breaks those imaginings through multiple perspectives in his art.

The Iraqi state, whether in the form of the Hashemite monarchy³⁶⁷, ‘Abdulkarim Qasim, Saddam Hussein³⁶⁸, or even al-Maliki³⁶⁹, has exemplified singular and absolute representations of the Iraqi individual, through language, customs and various other cultural forms of signification. Just as there has been a kind of hegemony imposed from above, there has always been resistance to that dominance. What Charles Tripp said of Iraq during the Hashemite years could not be more pertinent today than it was then:

when resistance moved into the cities and into the newly formed associations connected with the development of a more complex political society, these public spaces also attracted the deployment of force.³⁷⁰

³⁶⁷ Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 142.

³⁶⁸ Tripp, *A History*, p. 186.

³⁶⁹ See Charles Tripp, ‘Iraq after the US withdrawal’ in *The Middle East in London*, 8.2 (London: The Middle East in London, 2011), pp. 5-6 for more on the geopolitical climate in Iraq under al-Maliki’s rule.

³⁷⁰ Tripp, *A History*, p. 186.

In response to civil unrest in the face of corruption, government ineffectiveness and lawlessness, these governments have acted even more repressively, using coercion to ruthlessly crush any form of dissent. Dissidents have reacted against several government policies, especially the lack of inclusive ethnic and sectarian representation in the key cabinet positions. Under most of the mentioned regimes, Iraqi identity was portrayed and defined as Sunni Arab, while other groups in Iraq were marginalised.³⁷¹ Liora Lukitz has written extensively about the Sunni Arab political hegemony in Iraq: ‘the state represented not only a monopoly of power in the hands of the Sunnis but also a political expression of Sunni cultural values.’³⁷² She further states

the institutionalization of Sunni dominance over the various ethnic, sectarian and linguistic groups populating the three geographically distinct areas artificially united after the [First World] war was meant to create a united and homogenous society³⁷³.

Sunni dominance in Iraq thus could be seen as the legacy of Ottoman rule³⁷⁴, which was handed over to the Hashemite monarchy, then to be manipulated by Saddam’s Ba’thist rule. This exclusion of Iraq’s minorities, or even non-Arab-Sunnis, was consolidated by the 1930 Anglo-Iraqi Treaty which

made no mention of Iraq’s minorities [leading to] the determination of the Sunni leadership to construct an Iraqi identity that would draw mainly upon the Sunni Arab cultural reservoir³⁷⁵.

³⁷¹ Johan Franzen also discusses the rise of an Iraqi nationalist discourse. See Johan Franzen, ‘The Problem of Iraqi Nationalism’, *National Identities*, 13.3 (2011), pp. 217-234.

³⁷² Liora Lukitz, *Iraq: The Search for National Identity* (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 1995), p. 8.

³⁷³ Lukitz, *Iraq*, p. 13.

³⁷⁴ Tripp, *A History*, p. 45.

³⁷⁵ Lukitz, *Iraq*, p. 21.

Ethnic and sectarian tensions intensified during Saddam's rule, as anyone who tried to suggest an inclusive vision of Iraqi national identity was tortured or killed, such was the case of the Kurds – including the Kurds of the Anfal campaigns in 1988³⁷⁶ – and the Shi'i communities especially after the 1979 Iranian Revolution whereby Saddam fiercely repressed the Shi'i community and executed Muhammad Baqr al-Sadr and his sister Bint al-Huda³⁷⁷. Ironically, a few weeks into the 2003 U.S led occupation of Iraq

for the first time since the creation of the Iraqi state, the dominant community – rather than those at the margins, the Shi'ites and the Kurds – took up arms in an insurgency against foreign occupiers and the Iraqi state³⁷⁸

In the post Saddam era, the Sunnis have been included in the long list of the politically marginalised, with a large number of minorities having their rights violated both by government security forces and by official government policies.³⁷⁹ Sectarian

³⁷⁶ Kerim Yildiz, 'The Anfal Campaigns', in *Kurds in Iraq: Past, Present and Future* (London: Pluto Press, 2007), pp. 25-33.

³⁷⁷ Sarah Graham-Brown, *Sanctioning Saddam: The Politics of Intervention in Iraq* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999), p. 199. Other notable groups who were repressed by the Saddam regime were the Marsh Arabs. In the Marsh regions, government forces responded to resistance with artillery attacks and raids. The Euphrates was deviated, drainage canals were constructed to divert agricultural drainage water that had previously flowed into the marshes and the water that remained was poisoned, causing ecological damage to the environment as well as loss of livelihood and sustenance for the local populace. For more see Sam Kubba, *The Iraqi Marshlands and the Marsh Arabs: The Ma'dan, their Culture and the Environment* (Reading: Ithaca, 2009), pp. 14-9 and Graham-Brown, *Sanctioning Saddam*, pp. 201-5. According to Muhsin Musawi 'organized religion was targeted for different reasons, however, as Saddam and secular ideology in general thought of religious activism as regressive and reactionary. Even ethnic partisanship was not permissible for Saddam as it was for the secular left, since it ran against nationalism as much as it discredited class struggle divides. The problem in this line of thought is not one of right and wrong, for there must be a better reading of the masses, their needs, and expectations if a state or a regime seeks prolonged survival.

³⁷⁸ Ahmed S. Hashim, *Iraq's Sunni Insurgency* (Florence: Routledge, 2013), p. 11. Chapter One of this study offers a full historical account behind this recent hostility and shift in the power balance. For more see Hashim, 'Origins, Causes and Composition', in *Iraq's Sunni Insurgency*, pp. 13-24.

³⁷⁹ In the case of the Palestinians for example, not only have Iraqi officials from the Ministry of Interior arbitrarily beaten, tortured and arrested Palestinian refugees in Iraq, but the same Ministry has imposed a new bureaucratic requirement for Palestinians to annually renew their residency and had plans to close the al-Walid camp for Palestinian refugees. Other groups who have been subject to torture and

violence has reached unparalleled heights, with circles of patronage benefiting those in power. The scales have been tipped³⁸⁰, and of course there have been those voices that have continuously been silenced and marginalised such as the Christians, the Sabeans, the Chaldeans and the Jews who were harassed and eventually expelled in the 1930s.³⁸¹ The set up of such a hierarchy has considerably crippled Iraq's heterogeneous identity, as promoted in its place a seriously claustrophobic, exclusive identity revolving around authoritarian discourses.³⁸²

These totalitarian discourses, in attempts to promote a unified vision of Iraqi identity, have engaged in ignoring and more often lethally silencing the voices of the masses. Various writers who have tried to voice their dissent have been silenced and minority groups - such as those outlined in the various human rights reports³⁸³ - have been forced to change their names and religious and racial identities on national ID cards. In resisting this, al-Nasiri insists 'on the right to see the community's history

other forms of ill treatment include women – who have been the subject of human rights violation by U.S troops as well as Iraqi security officers and armed groups – Baha'is, Black Iraqis, Armenians, Chaldeans, Syrians, Assyrians, Faily Kurds, Jews, Kaka'is, Romas, Sabeian Mandeans, Shabaks, Turkmen and Yezidis. Access to basic amenities, housing, education and employment have been made especially difficult for members of these groups. For more information on human rights abuses please see Preti Taneja, *Iraq's Minorities: Participation in Public Life* (London: Minority Rights Group International, 2011); 'Iraq – Amnesty International Report 2010', [accessed 10 March 2012] and 'Iraq, At a Crossroads: Human Rights in Iraqi Eight Years after the US-Led Invasion' (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2010) <<https://www.hrw.org/report/2011/02/21/crossroads/human-rights-iraq-eight-years-after-us-led-invasion>> [accessed 10 March 2012].

³⁸⁰ The rising power of the Kurds and Shi'i political and religious establishments in opposition to their previous status as politically marginalized has been noted by many academics. For more on the specifics of how these two groups became the leading powers of Iraq see Gareth Stansfield, 'Regime Change, 2003 – ', in *Iraq: People, History, Politics* (2nd ed.) (Oxford: Wiley, 2013), pp. 159-191.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

³⁸² Mainly during Saddam Hussein's totalitarian rule, but with effects lasting until today, several minority groups have been manipulated in order to serve the interest of the state. Personal freedom had been forcibly stripped as the identity of the populace had to submit to Saddam's politics, especially during the Iran-Iraq war. As stated in Preti Taneja's report, Bahai's still suffer from Regulation 305 of 1975 which denied Bahai's the right to indicate their faith, instead recording them as 'Muslim' on identity cards. During the Ba'ath regime Faily Kurds had been persecuted, killed or even had their Iraqi citizenship withdrawn. One hundred thousand Faily Kurds have yet to have their citizenship reinstated. Roma community members were unable to own property and were denied access to senior positions in the military or government. In Nineveh the Shabak and Yezidi communities have been caught between Arabs and Kurds in the political struggle for ownership of territory. For more see Taneja, *Iraq's Minorities*, pp. 8-10.

³⁸³ See f.n. 382 above.

whole, coherently, integrally’³⁸⁴, without the divisions and factions created by nationalistic state discourses. Al-Nasiri states:

There is a deadly darkness at the moment. Perhaps art can bring light into this darkness. As artists, we only have one means to offer resistance in this, and that is our creativity. Even if we are surrounded by death and horror, we can put these experiences into our art, and try to find an expression for the suffering. Using art to help strengthen the Iraqi identity, to give our best, to stay on the international level – that is the only true resistance for me.³⁸⁵

The hegemonies described above have all in their own way lead to ‘deadly darkness’, ‘suffering’, ‘death and horror’. More overtly, the fragment refers to the suffering caused by the macropolitical structures vying for power in Iraq. But underlying that macrostructure, are the other smaller orthodoxies that serve to either reinforce the various world-views of these powers, or create independent traditions of their own.

What is needed in order to counter these oppressive forces is to resist oppression by ‘find[ing] an expression’ for it. This resistance in turn has two-fold results: first, it leads to ‘help strengthen the Iraqi identity’, and secondly, it works towards remaining on the international cultural scene as discussed above, working with other artists in the world, and being visible with a voice and an expression. Resistance thus serves not only to act as a counter-political force to engage in the discourse of identity politics, but also serves a more aesthetic purpose which is to continue in the international, planetary dialogue of the beauty of poetics.

If Iraqi artists do not produce art, then it means the visual arts of a region with a long trajectory of engagement with aesthetics will cease to be and will be wiped off

³⁸⁴ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. 259.

³⁸⁵ Rafa’ al-Nasiri, Interview with Martina Sabra, Qantara.de. 2008. <<http://en.qantara.de/Creativity-as-Resistance/8966c9048i1p504/>> [accessed 10 November 2011].

the cultural and artistic map. As heritage is being lost, looted and damaged, contemporary artists have an urgent duty to continue to engage in cultural production and interact in the world of beauty and aesthetics. In al-Nasiri's case, if there is no art, then the contemporary artistic map of Iraq will darken, and nothing will exist save the abandoned and neglected vestiges of the past.

A planetary art language

In order to demonstrate the planetarity at work in al-Nasiri's paintings, I want to first look at how notions of globalisation, rooted in Western modernity, have had an affect on readings of non-Western art. Paul J. Wood argues that 'globalization is responsible for the decentering of the Western [art] canon'³⁸⁶. The whole idea of globalisation is that it 'is the imposition of the same system of exchange everywhere'³⁸⁷, including cultural exchange. As I have demonstrated in previous chapters through engagement with Petersen's critique of the global artworld, non-Western art in the global art world is celebrated through the ways in which

it has perpetuated the kind of binary thinking whereby the West is associated with uniformity and universality, whereas the rest of the world is associated with multiplicity and difference. As a result, dichotomies and segregations have become deeply ingrained in the discourse on cultural identity in relation to contemporary art [...] the critical discourse itself is structured around a series of recurrent binary oppositions that are used to mark symbolic boundaries and create 'frontier effects'³⁸⁸.

³⁸⁶ Paul J. Wood, *Western Art and the Wider World* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), p. 15.

³⁸⁷ Spivak, 'Planetarity', p. 72.

³⁸⁸ Petersen, 'Identity Politics', p. 201.

Resisting this method of marketing his art in the global art market, al-Nasiri works to blur the dichotomies mentioned. Even before the proliferation of multiculturalism in art history discourses and art markets, hegemony for al-Nasiri and artists of his generation³⁸⁹ began with the Western educated elite of Iraqi art circles in the second half of the twentieth century. Born in 1940 in Tikrit, his first art degree was from the Institute of Fine Art, Baghdad where he studied 1956-1959.

Al-Nasiri's early works in this period are mostly portraits and figurative paintings, profuse in light and shading. They are colourful and in the impressionist style, focusing on the individual self, inspired by his teachers Faiq Hassan, Jewad Selim and Hafidh al-Droubi at the Institute. But his experience of visual art, as shown in his autobiography³⁹⁰, since his childhood in Iraq, was a mixture of exposure and fascination with Islamic art: from Arabesque woodwork, to Islamic calligraphy, to Western art forms through seeing the art of the early artists in Iraq. As such al-Nasiri was part of multiple cultural heritages.

The art teachers who taught him had studied in Western Europe. They were to be followed with a younger generation whose educational background was in the Social Realism of Communist countries.³⁹¹ After the revolution of 1958 and Iraq's withdrawal from the Baghdad Pact, state-sponsored scholarships in the arts meant students were encouraged to study in Socialist countries, as such enhancing the political and cultural ties between Iraq and the Socialist bloc.³⁹² One result of this cultural and political cooperation was an exhibition of Chinese antiques and

³⁸⁹ His contemporaries include Dia al-Azzawi (1939 -), Ismail Fattah (1934 – 2004), Salih al-Jumay'i (1939 -), Muhammad Mahr al-Din (1938 - 2015) and Hashim Samarchi (1939 -).

³⁹⁰ Rafa al-Nasiri, *Rihlati ila al-Sin* (Beirut: al-mu'asasa al-'arabiya li-l-dirasat wa-l-nashr, 2012).

³⁹¹ Nada Shabout, 'A Dream We Call Baghdad', in Zainab Bahrani and Nada Shabout, *Modernism and Iraq* (New York: Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University in the City of New York, 2009), p. 30.

³⁹² For more on China's political relations with Iraq during the late 1950s and early 1960s, consult Mohamed Bin Huwaidin, 'China's relation with Iraq, Iran and Yemen', in *China's Relations with Arabia and the Gulf 1949-1999* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), pp. 136-140.

calligraphy in 1959 in the Institute of Fine Arts' main hall, which al-Nasiri was mesmerised by after his visit, after which he left to study in China 1959 – 1963³⁹³.

Studying in China helped him to get a different perspective on the concerns of art in a context very different to that of the Western models which al-Nasiri's teachers were trained in and subsequently taught.³⁹⁴ After learning Mandarin, al-Nasiri became fascinated most with the ink paintings of Qi Baishi (1864 - 1957) and the woodblock prints made by his teachers Gu Yuan (1919 - 1996) and Li Hua (1907 - 1994). As Chang-Tai Hung informs us, both teachers' woodblock prints, although using aesthetics to encourage the masses to participate in revolutionary acts through reflecting the oppression of the political regime, reconfigured Western woodblock printing to suit particularly Chinese concerns.³⁹⁵ This medium, ridiculed by the elite of Chinese art, later became a politically valuable tool to demonstrate socially committed art supporting the state.³⁹⁶ In Iraq,

a strong interest in printmaking techniques emerged [as] the responsibility of the artist shifted from educating the public and shaping public taste to engaging with state policy and expressing people's needs.³⁹⁷

³⁹³ Samar Faruqi, 'Reconfiguring Identity in Modern Iraqi Art: Dia Al-Azzawi, Rafa Al-Nasiri and Ali Talib', in *Art in Iraq Today* (Milano: Skira, 2011), p. 57.

³⁹⁴ May Muzaffar, *Rafa' al-Nasiri: rassam al-mashahid al-kawniyya*, ([n.p.]: al-mu'asasa-l-'arabiyya li-l-dirasat wa-l-nashr, 2010), p. 21.

³⁹⁵ Chang-Tai Hung, 'Two Images of Socialism: Woodcuts in Chinese Communist Politics', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 39.1 (1997), p. 36-7. For a general overview on the cultural revolution in China please consult Richard Curt Kraus, *Cultural Revolution: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). Paul Clark however does a more detailed study on the radical arts program in *The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

³⁹⁶ Chang-Tai Hung, 'Two Images of Socialism: Woodcuts in Chinese Communist Politics', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 39.1 (1997), p. 36.

³⁹⁷ Shabout, 'A Dream We Call Baghdad', p. 30.



Figure 3.1.1

Rafaal-Nasiri
Untitled
 1957
 Courtesy of the artist

Al-Nasiri's art, beginning first with traditional painting, was to incorporate printing inspired by Chinese poetry and calligraphy for which he 'learnt about the power of the single brushstroke'³⁹⁸.

Ben-Ami Scharfstein would argue that this 'chaos [of different cultural influences is] governed [...] by rules of economics [rather] than aesthetics'³⁹⁹.

Although one cannot deny the power of market forces in art⁴⁰⁰, there is also a sense of

³⁹⁸ Faruqi, 'Reconfiguring Identity in Modern Iraqi Art', p. 57.

³⁹⁹ Ben-Ami Scharfstein, 'Intersecting Worlds and Identities', in *Art Without Borders: A Philosophical Exploration of Art and Humanity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 284.

⁴⁰⁰ Much research has been done on the relationship between visual art and economics. For the contemporary art scene please consult Olav Velthuis, *Talking Prices: Symbolic Meanings of Prices on*

choice in the aesthetic choices that an artist makes which goes beyond market hegemony. The aesthetic choice an artist makes is not simply defined by economic factors⁴⁰¹; for al-Nasiri, combining his Arabic and Chinese experiences was ‘regardless of [their] linguistic [and regional] connotation[s] to establish a kind of formal identification between nature and man’⁴⁰². This demonstrates that al-Nasiri was not celebrating local cultures as a binary of Western cultures. His choices reflected an inherent belief in planetary notions of human collectivity beyond identitarian politics.

Complicating the planetarity indicated by the combination of Arabic and Chinese experiences and artistic languages, al-Nasiri won a Gulbenkian scholarship to study at the Guevara Institute in Lisbon (1969). Whilst in Europe, he travelled to other European cities visiting museums and become infatuated especially with the works of Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn (1606 – 1669) and J. M. W. Turner (1775 – 1851)⁴⁰³. Additionally, he studied the English abstract expressionist Stanley William Hayter’s (1901 – 1988) etching on zinc technique⁴⁰⁴, whose relationship with literature was to influence al-Nasiri later on.

the Market for Contemporary Art (Princeton, N.J.; Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2005); Noah Horowitz, *Art of the Deal: Contemporary Art in a Global Financial Market* (Princeton, N.J.; Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2011); Edward Winkleman, *Selling Contemporary Art: How to Navigate the Evolving Market* (New York: Allworth Press, 2015); Pierre-Michel Menger, *The Economics of Creativity: Art and Achievement Under Uncertainty* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014).

⁴⁰¹ This may be the case when materials were limited in supply during the Iran-Iraq war. Shabout, ‘A Dream We Call Baghdad’, p. 31.

⁴⁰² Al-Nasiri, Interview with Samar Faruqi, in Faruqi, ‘Reconfiguring Identity in Modern Iraqi Art’, p. 58.

⁴⁰³ Faruqi, ‘Reconfiguring Identity in Modern Iraqi Art’, p. 57.

⁴⁰⁴ Al-Nasiri, ‘Interview’, in May Muzaffar, *Rafa’ al-Nasiri: rassam al-mashahid al-kawniya* (al-mu’assasa al-‘arabiya li-al-dirasat wa-l-nashr: Beirut, 2010), p. 74. Stanley William Hayter, through his atelier in Paris, met with and worked with a number of Modern European artists including Pablo Picasso (1881 – 1973), Joan Miró (1893 – 1983) and Marc Chagall (1887 – 1985). For more on Stanley William Hayter and his collaboration with poets, kindly see Sandra O’Connell, ‘The Europa Press and Atelier 17 Paris: “Limited Editions in Collaborations with Modern Artists and Engravers”’, in *European Avant-Garde: Text and Image*, ed. by Selena Daly and Monica Insinga (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), pp. 102 – 115.



Figure 3.1.2

Rafa al-Nasiri
Untitled
 1979
 Courtesy of the artist

Upon returning to Iraq in 1969 ‘Jama’at al-ru’ya al-jadida’, the New Vision Group, was born; its manifesto called for its contemporary artists to continuously challenge the boundaries imposed by society and social relationships. The manifesto, drafted by Dia al-Azzawi, urged contemporary civilisation and culture to revive

through change and resistance. The true artist is a 'critic' and a 'revolutionary'⁴⁰⁵. This revolutionary spirit cannot be understood without understanding the political instability of the region in the late 1960s. With the renewed Ba'ath party firmly in control of Iraq, and not long after the Arab defeat of the 1967 October War, al-Azzawi⁴⁰⁶ recalls how the events of 1967 influenced his writing of the manifesto. Because the younger generation of artists was not taken seriously by the elite of the Baghdad Group, the youth felt a need to be more open and to challenge the Iraqi nationalism inherent in the artistic choices of the older teachers. As a result, the members of the New Vision Group were more politically and artistically engaged with pan-Arab social and political affairs.

The dissatisfaction inherent in the New Vision Group's manifesto was already prominently setting the tone in artistic and intellectual circles before the event of the Arab Defeat in 1967.⁴⁰⁷ In the specific case of Iraq, its emergence from a constitutional monarchy to a parliamentary system and the violence with which such a transition took place helped to create a discourse within culture seeking to discuss the changing order of society. In al-Nasiri's autobiography he mentions the relationship between specific artists' works and the 1958 revolution⁴⁰⁸, possibly suggesting an early link between his aesthetic sensibility and his awareness of political developments in Iraq, and how these two were forged by his teachers.

⁴⁰⁵ Ismail Fattah, Salih al-Jumay'i, Dia al-Azzawi, Rafa al-Nasiri, Muhammad Mahr al-Din, Hisham Samarchi, *Nahwa-l Ru'ya-l-Jadida* (Baghdad: Tab' Mu'assasat Ramzi, 1969), p. 1. Translated from the Arabic by the current author. See also Kamil, *al-Tashkil al-'Iraqi*, p. 143.

⁴⁰⁶ Faruqi, 'Reconfiguring Identity in Modern Iraqi Art', p. 54-5.

⁴⁰⁷ AMCA, 'The Longevity of Rupture: 1967 in Art and Its Histories', American University of Beirut, Beirut, June 1-2 2012. For more information on specific papers, please see <http://amcainternational.org/the-longevity-of-rupture-1967-in-art-and-its-histories-4/> [Accessed 6th June 2013].

⁴⁰⁸ In al-Nasiri, *Rihlati ila al-Sin*, p. 46, 46 and 49 he mentions the names of Ata Sabri, Jewad Selim and Khalid al-Rahal respectively. See also p. 53

What both these events had in common was that they reiterated recycled memories in political discourses. As Darwish has said about the 1967 Arab defeat, discussed in Chapter 2, it came as a shock to a people who were exposed to political rhetoric, manipulating memories of Islamic successes in history. The vexation with the political realities of the time was reflected in the artistic practices of the established Iraqi fine art elite. The recycled memories of Western art hegemonies were also resisted by the younger generation of artists.

Internalising the multitude of art traditions, techniques that he had learnt since the beginning of his artistic career, al-Nasiri became increasingly uncomfortable with the myths of memory which plagued his art practice. His art of the 1980s demonstrates an abandonment of figurative and landscape painting,⁴⁰⁹ predominantly employing hues of blue. Despite the fact that the Iran - Iraq war (1980 – 1988) was in full swing, the art al-Nasiri produced in this period demonstrates optimistic ‘cosmescapes’⁴¹⁰, recreations of the cosmic sphere which man inhibits. Resilience in the face of the horrors of death, his works reveal a conscious attempt to remain optimistic and hopeful.⁴¹¹ With the atrocities of the Iraq - Kuwait war (1990) soon following, paintings heavily dominated by hues of black, red and yellow represent the memories of darkness which Iraq was experiencing at the time and which continue to resonate today.

⁴⁰⁹ This is notable during his departure from Iraq in 1990 where he left to Jordan to teach at the University of Yarmuk in Amman, Jordan 1991-1997, then at the University of Bahrain 1997-2003. As a result of his emigration from Iraq, al-Nasiri was no longer working alongside his colleagues, despite the fact that the Group had dissolved much earlier on in the mid 1970s. Al-Azzawi for example left Iraq in 1975 for London where he remains to this day. In a private conversation, al-Azzawi informed me this departure was a result of increased state surveillance of art works.

⁴¹⁰ Sadoun Fazil, *Baghdad Observer*, referred to in May Muzaffar, ‘The cosmic scene Rafa Nasiri 1989-1999’, <http://www.rafaNasiri.com/0page_articles/article_1.html> [accessed 20th October 2011].

⁴¹¹ Both Surrealism and Sufism are concerned with Truth. Both philosophies see reality as more correctly manifested in the hidden. Dreams are one way of revealing hidden truths, whereas consciousness is an escape from truths. For more on the comparison between Sufism and Surrealism see Ali Ahmad Sa'id Adunis, *Sufism and Surrealism* (London: Saqi, 2005).



Figure 3.1.3
 Rafa al-Nasiri
Untitled
 1992
 Courtesy of artist

The memories of identitarian divisions along religious and political lines have continued into the turn of the 21st century, impacting al-Nasiri's 'Homage' to be analysed here. Considering Iraq's institutional strength is 'very weak [...] as reflected in very weak governance indicators and issues regarding the availability of fiscal and economic data'⁴¹², combined with high political and security risks, the state is in a

⁴¹² 'Moody's assigns provisional rating of (P)Caa1 to Government of Iraq's USD bond issuance; Outlook stable', *moodys.com*, 2015 <https://www.moodys.com/research/Moodys-assigns-provisional-rating-of-PCaa1-to-Government-of-Iraqs--PR_334915> [accessed 16 July 2016].

weak position to pay its sovereign debts, necessary for the country to function.⁴¹³ Combined with this are deep ethnic and sectarian divisions, creating huge domestic political challenges⁴¹⁴. Fuelled by conflicting memories, the future seems to be bleak for Iraq. But as the paintings which form the subject of this Chapter demonstrate, to be discussed further below, there is a light present, a straddle between abstract expressionism, and figurative paintings with the use of Arabic calligraphy and Chinese calligraphyism⁴¹⁵, which carries the torch to human salvation from the bloody messiness of war, carnage and rampage. Through a careful semiological negotiation of memories of nostalgia, al-Nasiri resists the identitarian conflicts rooted in contemporary Iraqi society which are the result of conflicting memories, as such attempting to portray a planetary art practice.

This planetary vision of al-Nasiri resists the current political authority of Iraq which voices its legitimacy by selecting memories of Saddam's ethnic and sectarian injustices.⁴¹⁶ In a similar way as Saddam himself used to do, the new political elite uses culture to consolidate its power by asserting its right to exist. It exercises its power as a vehicle of the state and creates the conditions to make people feel part of an established historical community, legitimated by a negotiated and selective

⁴¹³ The Economist [online] 'Iraq's Economy: An Empty Chest' March 21 2015 <<http://www.economist.com/news/finance-and-economics/21646804-fiscal-problems-add-countrys-woes-empty-chest>> [accessed 6th May 2015].

⁴¹⁴ Cathy Otten, 'Yazidis rescued from Isis need action from Britain, says former Iraqi MP Aameena Saeed Hasan' The Independent [online] Saturday 30 August 2015 <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/yazidis-rescued-from-isis-need-action-from-britain-says-former-iraqi-mp-aameena-saeed-hasan-10479173.html>> [accessed 5 September 2015].

⁴¹⁵ 'Calligraphyism seeks to alter the basic structure of the characters themselves, even if they can no longer be read as writing. Calligraphy in this sense becomes pure abstract art, essentially a Chinese postmodernism.' Yiguo Zhang, *Brushed Voices: Calligraphy in Contemporary China* (Miriam & Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery: Columbia University, 1998), p. 56.

⁴¹⁶ Zalmay Khalilzad, translated in Hamid al-Bayati, 'Uniting the Opposition', in *From Dictatorship to Democracy: An Insider's Account of the Iraqi Opposition to Saddam* (Philadelphia; Oxford: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), p. 172. Even the President George W. Bush pushed for the 1990 Gulf War based on his memories of a historical event. See Alex Roberto Hybel and Justin Matthew Kaufman, 'The Apple Sometimes Falls Close to the Tree', in *The Bush Administrations and Saddam Hussein: Deciding on Conflict* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 112.

collective memory. Edward Said says that if hegemony does this, then a resistance to that hegemonic culture must also exist.

[If hegemonic culture] will add to itself the prerogatives given by its sense of national identity, its power as an implement, ally or branch of the state, its rightness, its exterior forms and assertions of itself: and [...] by its vindicated power as a victor over everything not itself [...] and if it creates the environment and the community that allows people to feel they belong, then it must be true that resistance to the culture has always been present.⁴¹⁷

As I will show below, al-Nasiri disrupts the conceptualisation of a bound national identity, strengthened by carefully selected collective and individual memories, and severs his art from authorities which may use it as an ‘implement, ally or branch of the state’ to recycle it back into the machine of memories.

In opposition to the manipulation of collective and individual memories to construct defined boundaries of ‘imagined totalities’, the paintings in ‘Homage’ exhibit independent aesthetics which defy regional binaries. In doing so, al-Nasiri’s art can be translated into an independent political statement on the injustices of the status quo. As the artworks intermingle with various aesthetic traditions, playing on memory as being flawed and distorted, notions of belonging also become complicated, as there is no fixed system of representation or locale. From the perspective of exile, al-Nasiri transcends centres of power in all their vestiges. In his work, identitarian belonging becomes irrelevant and collective planetarity comes in its place.

Cultural memory

⁴¹⁷ Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, p. 14.

Thus, unlike the character of Abu Ghayib who wants to remain in the past, al-Nasiri projects a vision of the future, by carefully selecting and transforming cultural memories, as such building on a certain version of the past. The effort to create a planetary perspective in his art to resist narrow definitions of identity and culture requires the employment of cultural memory as a discursive strategy.

As I have shown in relation to Saddam Hussein, the construction of cultural memory works by manipulating, editing and recontextualising the past:

Cultural memory exists in two modes: first in the mode of potentiality of the archive whose accumulated texts, images, and rules of conduct act as a total horizon, and second in the mode of actuality, whereby each contemporary context puts the objectivised meaning into its own perspective, giving it its own relevance.⁴¹⁸

Al-Nasiri's use of cultural memory in the 'Homage' series activates cultural memory in the 'mode of potentiality of the archive', the archive being that of Arabic poetry, which is full of potential to cultivate a cultural memory. In its contemporary usage, the poetry becomes no longer stagnant in the past, but a powerful tool in the present with its own contemporary context. Archives become a source of self-fashioning, a construction within a larger collective identity.

As these past cultural documents shape collective identities, they take part in the process of canonisation. Each time this canon is engaged in the contemporary context, a statement is being made both about the past, but also about present projections of the future, which look at the past as a model. Using the cultural

⁴¹⁸ Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka, 'Collective Memory and Cultural Identity', *New German Critique*, 65 (1995), p. 130.

memory of al-Andalus, through the canonized ‘qafiyya’ poem, is a way of giving contemporary relevance to imagining a future Iraq, based on multiple identities, tolerance and metaphorical light to resist the ‘deadly darkness’ of post-2003 Iraq.

Resisting erasure and the cultural vacuum

Although al-Nasiri doesn’t want to participate in a national art canon, he resists the tyrannies of the present by continuing to produce art and as such continues to challenge cultural memories, rather than to remain dormant which would lead to stagnation.

This continuous effort is further encouraged by an increasingly supportive art infrastructure through publishing, galleries, art fairs, biennales and academies. Most immediate to him is Charles Pocock’s *Iraqi Art Today* exhibition, which was a series of group exhibitions on contemporary Iraqi art in 2010 and included a publication⁴¹⁹. Other publications in which he was included were May Muzaffar’s numerous articles in English⁴²⁰ as well as Nada Shabout’s numerous books and articles, referenced throughout this thesis. This shows us how the developments in modern Iraqi art have contributed to the development of a contemporary art scene. Academic organisations such as the Association of Modern and Contemporary of Art of the Arab World, Iran

⁴¹⁹ Charles Pocock, ‘Foreword’, in *Art in Iraq Today*, pp. 12-9; Dia al-Azzawi, ‘Introduction’, in *Art in Iraq Today*, pp. 8-11.

⁴²⁰ Some of these are in *Iraq: Its History, People, and Politics; Contemporary Art from the Islamic World*, ed. by Wijdan Ali (London: Scorpion on behalf of the Royal Society of Fine Arts, Amman, 1989); and Wijdan Ali, *Modern Islamic Art: Development and Continuity* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997).

and Turkey (AMCA) and the rising prevalence of academics and research students such as Saleem al-Bahloly⁴²¹ on the subject of Iraq, give impetus to the creation of art.

Since Nada Shabout's conclusion that Arab 'art is still an emerging field in need of analysis and investigation'⁴²², many studies have been produced related to contemporary Middle Eastern art. Sonja Mejcher-Atassi has made an attempt to look at the writings and art of Jabra Ibrahim Jabra (1920 – 1994), Etel Adnan (1925 –) and Abd al-Rahman Munif (1933 – 2004)⁴²³, and many other scholars are undertaking similar projects in the field of Arab art.⁴²⁴

So, al-Nasiri's art works function as part of a wider cultural discourse to resist the degradation in cultural innovation. The way in which he does so is not through reverting back to older national nor to contemporary global paradigms, but by situating Iraqi culture at the crossroads of memories of its civilisational history and influences from other geographies.

Iraqi art groups: Mesopotamian memories, nationalist history

To understand al-Nasiri's inherent planetarity better, and his resistance to nationalist memories, I want to outline briefly, what for him and his generation of artists, constituted the hegemonic art elitism.

⁴²¹ See Saleem al-Bahloly, 'The Freedom of Despair: Art and Violence in the Middle East, 1941-1979' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of California, Berkley, 2015); and Saleem al-Bahloly, 'The Persistence of the Image: *Dhakira Hurra* in Dia Azzawi's Drawings on the Massacre of Tel al-Zaatar', *ARTmargins*, 2.2 (2013), pp. 71-97.

⁴²² Nada Shabout, *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2007), p. 153.

⁴²³ Sonja Mejcher-Atassi, *Reading Across Modern Arabic Literature and Art* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2012).

⁴²⁴ A few of these established and also younger scholars are writing to have Arab art in museums better understood. Some of these scholars have contributed to research for Mathaf: Museum of Modern Arab Art, Doha. 'Authors', *Mathaf Encyclopedia of Modern Art and the Arab World* <<http://www.encyclopedia.mathaf.org/en/Pages/Author-credentials.aspx>> [accessed 16 July 2016].

As technology continued to advance⁴²⁵ towards the end of the Ottoman Empire, and with British and French imperialism on the rise, travel and trade between the continents increased. Technologies, ideas, languages and peoples got in continuous flux. As a result of the mobility of people in the Ottoman Empire, the Iraqi ‘Abdul Qadir al-Rassam (1882 – 1952) was able to study painting in the European traditions in Istanbul.⁴²⁶

After artists like him became established names amongst the Iraqi elite, the Iraqi constitutional monarchy saw the need to train more artists, and began offering art scholarships in 1931⁴²⁷. In fact, the two King Faisals of Iraq (both I and II) were said to have taken a personal interest in fine arts.⁴²⁸ Upon the return of many Iraqi artists who took advantage of this new state patronage, they became the first teachers at the Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad which opened in 1939. These same artists formed their own official groups, although it often happened that these artists were also part of other groups. ‘Jama‘at al-Ruwwad’ (1950) (The Pioneer Group); ‘Jama‘at Baghdad li-l-fann al-hadith’ (1951) (The Baghdad Group of Modern Art) used modern Western art techniques and materials to recycle memories of Mesopotamian mythology and configurations of national heritage. Painting by the ‘al-intiba‘iyyin’

⁴²⁵ Networks of cultural and linguistic exchanges have existed before European colonialism. This was the theme of the workshop *Multilingual Locals and Significant Geographies before Colonialism*, SOAS, 16-18 June 2016.

⁴²⁶ ‘Adil Kamil, *al-Tashkil al-‘Iraqi: al-ta’sis wa-al-tanawwu’*, (Baghdad: Dar al-Rashid li-l-Nashr: Wizarat al-Thaqafah wa-al-I‘lam, 2000), p. 124.

⁴²⁷ These scholarships were to Rome, Paris and London, possibly as a result of British influence in the country. For more on the Iraqi monarchy’s patronage of the Arts see Shakir Hasan al-Sa’id, *al-fann al-tashkili al-Iraqi al-mu’asir* (Tunis: al-Munazima al-‘arabiya li-l-tarbiya wa-l-thaqafa wa-l-‘ulum, 1992), pp. 23-27. The first exhibition of Iraqi art took place later in 1956. For more on the prizes that were awarded to the exhibiting artists see Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, *Judhur al-fann al-‘Iraqi* (Baghdad: tab’ al-Dar al-‘Arabiyya Baghdad, 1986). This early study of the modern Iraqi art scene is essential reading for anyone interested in modern and contemporary art in Iraq, the Arab world and the Middle East.

⁴²⁸ Shawkat al-Rubai’i has noted that King Faisal I was so taken by Fa’iq Hasan’s talent when coincidentally seeing him paint a landscape that he promised to send him to Europe to study art as soon as he finished primary school. Al-Sa’id, *al-fann al-tashkili al-Iraqi al-mu’asir*, p. 23. Dia al-Azzawi also notes he was promised by King Faisal II to study abroad after inviting him to the royal palace, just before the revolution of 1958. See Dia al-Azzawi, ‘Plastic art intertwined with world literature: an Iraqi testimony’, *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, 34 (2014), p. 11.

group (1953) (The Impressionists) – founded by Hafed al-Druby (1914-1991) – markedly painted scenes from Old Baghdad's alleys, markets, buildings, portraits and scenes of youth doing everyday physical activities. The latter's art contained no political, religious or other ideological demarcations.

One example of how one artist circulated memories of Mesopotamian myths is in Jewad Selim's 'Nasb al-Hurriyya' (Freedom Monument), a collaboration between Iraqi architect Rif'at al-Chadirchi and Jewad Selim (following Selim's death in 1961 Iraqi sculptor Muhammed Ghani Hikmet completed the work).⁴²⁹ The Monument is in the middle of metropolitan Tahrir Square in Baghdad, measuring 50m wide by 10m high, and depicting figures opposing the violent onslaught of various oppressors. One of the most recognisable public monuments in Iraq, for Selim this was an artistic means to express 'a new world'.⁴³⁰

⁴²⁹ Hashim al-Tawil, 'Invasion, War and Destruction of Cultural Memory: The Case of Modern Iraqi Public Monuments' in Nada M. Shabout (ed.) *Dafatir: Contemporary Iraqi Book Art* (Denton, Texas: University of North Texas Press, 2007), p. 30

⁴³⁰ Kanan Makiya, 'Turath as Art', in *The Monument: Art and Vulgarly in Saddam Hussein's Iraq* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2004), p. 82.



Figure 3.2.1

Rif'at al-Chadiri, Jewad Selim and Muhammad Ghani Hikmet

Nasb al-Huriyya

1963

Bronze on taverline

50m x 10m

Baghdad, Iraq

Selim's monument was commissioned by Abdulkarim Qasim's government (1958-1963) in order to demonstrate his victory after years of colonial rule under the Hashemite monarchy (1921-1958) to the Iraqi public.⁴³¹ It consists of ten separate units joined together and depicts 25 figures, 'combining the linear quality of Arabic characters and stylised form of Sumerians and Babylonians with modern Western styles'.⁴³²

⁴³¹ Makiya, 'Turath as Art', p. 82.

⁴³² Shabout, 'Art in Occupied Iraq', p. 43. In her article, 'The "Free Art of Occupation: Images for a "New" Iraq', *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 28.3/4 (2006), pp. 41-53, Nada Shabout gives many examples of how artists were rewarded, not just during Saddam's Ba'thi rule, but also how certain figures who were allowed to construct public monuments in post-Saddam Iraq were rewarded by the occupying forces, not just through monetary gains, but also through media coverage and recognition.

Kanan Makiya, suggests an affinity between this public monument and Picasso⁴³³, which would shed light on the universal humanism behind this masterpiece of modern Iraqi art and sculpture. Selim's figures become like characters from Sumerian and Babylonian myths, heroically victorious in battle and successfully resisting the advances of the enemy.⁴³⁴ Needing to be 'read' from right to left, creating a resonance with Arabic writing, Selim establishes his mural deeply in Mesopotamian antiquity and Arabic literary traditions without completely disorienting the final work from the aesthetics of the status quo of his time. Thus, through the work's depiction of 'injustice, resistance, solidarity, hope and ambition,' Selim was able to use a style of 'abstract expressive symbolism' not completely dissimilar to Picasso's 'Guernica'⁴³⁵, simultaneously recycling and re-presenting visually modern Iraqi nationalism in the guise of memories of Mesopotamian myths.

As Shabout states, 'throughout his rule, Saddam did not dare touch the iconic image of Selim's 'Nasb al-Hurriyyah''⁴³⁶ because the monument was found to be useful in the cultural policy of the Ba'thist regime.⁴³⁷ Makiya argues the reason for the Monument's survival during

Saddam Husain's reign [was] only because the Arab Ba'th Socialist Party holds that its notion of freedom is the legitimate heir and logical culmination of what was begun in 1958, even though the public long ago ceased to be a force in civic affairs.⁴³⁸

⁴³³ Makiya, 'Turath as Art', p. 89.

⁴³⁴ For more on the importance of Babylonian and Sumerian heritage in constructing a modern national culture see Orit Bashkin, *The Other Iraq: Pluralism and Culture in Hashemite Iraq* (Stanford; California: Stanford University Press, 2009).

⁴³⁵ Shabout, 'Art in Occupied Iraq', p. 43.

⁴³⁶ Shabout, 'Art in Occupied Iraq', p. 43.

⁴³⁷ For more on how Mesopotamian culture was mobilized under the Ba'thist regime in Iraq, see Amatzia Baram, 'Mesopotamian Identity in Ba'thi Iraq', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 19.4 (1983), pp. 426-55.

⁴³⁸ Makiya, 'Turath as Art', p. 82.

Thus, the memory of events of 1958 was recycled and re-presented as the beginning of Ba’thist notions of liberation, even though was intended as a nationalist symbol. It becomes apparent that nationalist and ancient memories can all be manipulated to serve the political agenda of negotiating a ‘new’ cultural memory and consciousness, legitimating its power. In addition to making these public monuments part of his own canon, the new Ba’th state under Saddam needed cultural institutions to further entrench collective memories in cultural experiences. Apart from encouraging the revival of ancient Mesopotamian heritage through patronage and commissions, the government set up Markaz Saddam li-l-Funun in 1986 (Saddam’s Arts Centre).

Al-Nasiri is going beyond these nationalist modes of artistic expression and artistic institutionalisation which reinsert memories of a historical past in the present. He resists the nationalist ideology of the present which is scaffolded by the strength of collective cultural memory. By mystically subverting the Arabic literary canon and fusing it with a Chinese Daoist prism of freedom through emptiness, he is in Said’s words:

[...] standing consciously against the prevailing orthodoxy and very much for a professedly universal or humane set of values, which has provided significant local resistance to the hegemony of one culture [as] an isolated individual consciousness, going against the surrounding environment as well as allied to contesting classes, movements, and values, is an isolated voice out of place but very much *of* that place.⁴³⁹

As I will show in detail below, al-Nasiri’s orthodoxies are not just limited to the traditions of ancient myths, but also include the constructed nationalist canonisation

⁴³⁹ Said, *The World, the Text and the Critic*, p. 15.

of legendary narratives of Madinat al-Zahra and Ibn Zaydun's love affair with Wallada.



Figure 3.2.2
Hafed al-Druby
Suq Baghdad

1973
 85cm x 65cm
 Baghdad, Iraq
 Oil on canvas
 Courtesy of Mina al-Druby

Conflating spaces through Ibn Zaydun's 'qafiyya': From memories of Madinat al-Zahra, Wallada, to Baghdad

Ibn Zaydun is an Andalusí poet born in Córdoba, during the transition between the Umayyad 'unified' rule of al-Andalus and the emergence of the petty kingdoms there. Ibn Zaydun is remembered in Arab cultural memory for having been involved in a passionate love affair with Wallada bint al-Mustakfi (1001-1091), daughter of a Cordoban caliph. After he asked her slave to repeat a song he liked, which stirred her jealousy, she attacked Ibn Zaydun in her poetry⁴⁴⁰.

This collective memory is triggered by Andalusí historians and chroniclers⁴⁴¹ who have stated that the 'qafiyya' was composed upon visiting Madinat al-Zahra⁴⁴², a town which was home to the great palace built in the Islamic style by the Umayyad Caliph of Córdoba Abd al-Rahman III al-Nasir, remembering Wallada.⁴⁴³ Ibn Zaydun began writing of her, describing the immaculate beauty of the town and emphasising his continued loyalty towards her despite her departure in his 'qafiyya'.

⁴⁴⁰ Devin J. Stewart, 'Ibn Zaydun', in *Literature of Al-Andalus*, p. 309. See also Salma Khadra Jayyusi, 'Andalusí Poetry: The Golden Period', in *The Legacy of Muslim Spain*, p. 364, f.n. 54.

⁴⁴¹ See Ahmad Ibn Abdullah Ibn Zaydun, *Shi'r Ibn Zaydun*, ed. by Karam al-Bustani (Bayrut: Maktabat Sadir, 1951) and Shawqi Dayf, *Ibn Zaydun* (Cairo: [n. pub.], 1979). Both give this anecdote but these are secondary literature on the topic written several years after the death of Ibn Zaydun. It is also important to note al-Maqqari's lyrical tone when writing of the Ibn Zaydun-Wallada love affair, adding to the intensity and romance of the narration. See Ahmad ibn Muhammad al-Maqqari, *Nafh al-tib: min ghusn al-Andalus al-ratib* (Cairo: al-Maktabah al-Tijariyah al-Kubra, 1949) for this.

⁴⁴² Madinat al-Zahra has been extensively excavated. Commissioned in 2001 and opened to the public in 2008 the Madinat al-Zahra Museum was built to facilitate in the display, interpretation and research of the site's archaeology. For the Museum website see <<http://www.juntadeandalucia.es/cultura/museos/CAMA/>> [accessed 16 June 2016].

⁴⁴³ D. Fairchild Ruggles, 'The Mirador in Abbasid and Hispano-Umayyad Garden Typology', *Muqarnas*, 7 (1990), pp. 73-82.

Madinat al-Zahra has been chronicled by historians to have been ransacked in 1010, when Ibn Zaydun was seven years old. What could have been a reservoir of childhood memories was disrupted. Ibn Zaydun's nostalgic poetic evocation of the place could indeed be a reversion of his memories as opposed to a description of the space at the time of writing the poem. To suggest that Ibn Zaydun was referencing a space that he experienced would be to create a myth of cultural memory itself.

Ann Rosemary Christys has discussed the historiographic fallacies within writings of Madinat al-Zahra and other Andalusí architectural works. She states that even where archaeological remains exist, 'their realities, albeit splendid, do not quite live up to their literary reputation.'⁴⁴⁴ Literary formulations of space are thus fed by the imagination and the instability of memory, in which, incongruence between the literary counterpart and physical evidence persists.⁴⁴⁵

This insight into the discrepancies between lived time and space, and constructed fictionalisations of time and space do not just give us a view into the subjectivities of histories, but also tell us something about notions and perceptions of beauty. Aesthetics of space do not have an absolute value⁴⁴⁶; I argue that despite this, al-Nasiri is employing partial myths that are necessary in order to fabricate an artistic vision for the future. Although we should be aware of the fact that these are ultimately knowledge constructions, these myths provide ways to know (versions of) our past

⁴⁴⁴ Ann Rosemary Christys, *Christians in al-Andalus 711-1000* (London; New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 15.

⁴⁴⁵ D. F. Ruggles also writes about the ruins of Madinat al-Zahra and its imaginings in Arabic poetry including Ibn Zaydun's 'qafiyya'. See 'Arabic Poetry and Architectural Memory in Al-Andalus', *Ars Orientalis*, 23 (1993), pp. 171-78.

⁴⁴⁶ In drawing connections between architecture and poetry in another Andalusí context, José Miguel Puerta Vilchez writes 'without its verses, the Alhambra's programme of signification is incomplete', in 'Speaking Architecture: Poetry and Aesthetics in the Alhambra Palace', in *Calligraphy and Architecture in the Muslim World*, p. 45. In a very different way, al-Nasiri is using the verses of the 'qafiyya' to reimagine and signify a more peaceful Iraq.

and are elements we can then use to create visions of the future. As such this allows us to celebrate the created subjectivity as fiction, rather than as a given truth.

Christys goes on to argue on the fictionalising process of Madinat al-Zahra through story-telling:

As ‘the tragic circumstances of Madinat al-Zahras destruction propelled it from an already fantastic place of grandeur and magnificence into a truly mythological realm’, the details of its construction became more fantastic with each retelling.⁴⁴⁷

Fantasising space in this way becomes an urgent call to hold onto a cultural memory, for without memories, images of the future are not possible since they need a point of reference to build on.

Just as Madinat al-Zahra was damaged with only ruins left for Ibn Zaydun’s viewing, we can draw the parallel that Iraqi society too is being fragmented and torn apart more so than ever, especially following the U.S led invasion of Iraq. Decline, intolerance and stagnation are terms that can be used when talking about civil society in Iraq today. Al-Nasiri resists such a reading, placing these various voices harmonically next to each other, so they coexist and interact with one another through the use of the poem, which appreciates beauty, youth and nature. However, similar to Madinat’s recent excavations, with archaeological efforts to house the excavations in the Museum (the construction of which was completed two years before al-Nasiri’s paintings were finished) after many years of neglect, so does al-Nasiri’s expression of hope to rebuild Iraq, unite different versions of its history and memory.

⁴⁴⁷ Christys, *Christians in Al-Andalus*, p. 16.

This conflation of time and space uses a Chinese aesthetic approach in reimagining Iraq. Al-Nasiri tells us

[In] ‘Homage to Ibn Zaydun’, I tried to combine the supreme status of his beloved, Princess Wallada bint al-Mustakfi (1009-1078) [...] within the scope of time and place (Andalusian Córdoba) where this romance took place.⁴⁴⁸

The specific time and place of 11th century Cordoba is referenced, and corresponds to Hu Shi’s aesthetic principle of knowledge being not general and ‘global’, but specific, which brings to light the peculiarities of each history and geography in order to enable us to draw better connections between the past, the present and the future.

As the paintings below will illustrate, this search for knowledge encompasses a turn to the East – where the sun and hence light rises – to Chinese philosophical and aesthetic discourses and to al-Andalus, an integral and indeed nostalgic part of Arab history’s ‘Golden Age’. Integrating Islamic al-Andalus in this way as a significant prism through which to understand the current state of Iraqi cultural heritage, history and nationhood to

redefine the present was a characteristic feature in the development of a modern and distinctly Arab literature [and here I add visual arts], which thereby sought to distance itself from the pervasive European influence in Middle Eastern cultural and intellectual life during the colonial age and after⁴⁴⁹.

⁴⁴⁸ Rafa al-Nasiri, ‘Art in Iraq Today’ brochure, 2011.

⁴⁴⁹ Achim Rohde, *State-Society Relations in Ba’thist Iraq*, p. 127.

The use of a canonical Andalusí poem does not simply polemically ‘distance’ al-Nasirí’s work from ‘the pervasive European influence’, but is a much deeper attempt to ground his own work in

memories and symbolic imageries that are subjective and selective, and one could argue that al-Andalus is a fiction constructed in the present in order to satisfy contemporary needs and to feed modern imaginations.⁴⁵⁰

I would argue that employing Ibn Zaydun’s poem is not simply a romantic appropriation of canonical Arabic poetry, contemplating lost love and describes beauty, but is a politically and ideologically motivated selection of a moment in time and space which acts in opposition to the interference of Western hegemonic forces in Iraq. It is thus a postcolonial act of empowerment. Al-Nasirí is resisting the homogenous discourses as set out by the West, and sets up an alternative space than that of the suffering that surrounds us.

This aspect of resistance is

an alternative way of conceiving human history [...] based on breaking down the barriers between cultures [...] *writing back* to the metropolitan cultures, disrupting the European narrative of the Orient and Africa, replacing them with either a more playful or a more powerful new narrative style.⁴⁵¹

Considering that al-Nasirí uses Ibn Zaydun who has similarly lamented Umayyad ‘unified’ Andalus elsewhere in his poetry, sets up a utopia through his art where plurality can exist.

⁴⁵⁰ Alexander E. Elinson, *Looking Back at al-Andalus: The Poetics of Loss and Nostalgia in Medieval Arabic and Hebrew Literature* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2009), pp. 2-3.

⁴⁵¹ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 260.

Using the poem serves to mystically break down and reinvent nostalgia to serve the present political situation. In discussing rewritings on al-Andalus, William Granara states

This temporality, rich in ambiguity and possibility for nostalgia and expectation, for loss and renewal, for despair and hope, lies at the heart of every rewriting of Al-Andalus. Eleventh century Cordoba as "time" falls between the recent memory of a glorious past, of political power and cultural and intellectual achievement, and the ominous signs of decline, intolerance, and stagnation.⁴⁵²

By using the glorious 'golden' memory of al-Andalus in the paintings which Ibn Zaydun describes in his poem, al-Nasiri is nostalgically remembering the glory of an Islamic civilisation as it spread to the far corners of western Europe. In doing so, the memory of al-Andalus also evokes a landscape which is pluralistic and heterogenous in voice, governed by 'enlightened rulers, [enjoying] state patronage of arts and sciences, [promoting] tolerance of religious diversity; and intellectual freedom',⁴⁵³, things al-Nasiri envisions for Iraq.

⁴⁵² William Granara, 'Nostalgia, Arab Nationalism, and the Andalusian Chronotope in the Evolution of the Modern Arabic Novel', *Journal of Arabic Literature* 36.1 (2005), p. 65. Al-Andalus is nostalgically used by artists, writers and filmmakers, including Nizar Qabbani (Nizar Qabbani, 'Fi madkhal al-Hamra'); Mahmoud Darwish (Mahmoud Darwish, 'Ahzan fi al-Andalus'); Radwa Ashour (Radwa Ashour, *Granada: A Novel* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2003); and Youssef Chahine (Youssef Chahine, *Destiny [Al Massir]* (Editions Montparnasse), 1997. For more on Chahine's *Destiny* and Arab nationalism, see Malek Khouri, *The Arab National Project in Youssef Chahine's Cinema* (Cairo; New York: American University in Cairo Press, 2010). Al-Andalus is often constructed as an exemplary state where various communities co-habitated harmoniously which was subsequently lost.

⁴⁵³ Frishkopf, 'Contemporary Egyptian Music' in *Mediterranean Mosaic*, p. 152. Most scholarship surrounding Muslim al-Andalus was produced in a specific historical moment where Islam was seen, by the American administration and the American public, as a fundamentalist religion promoting terrorism and conflict, especially in the wake of the Palestinian Intifada. Thus, Arabist scholars felt a need to provide a counter narrative to the mainstream public opinion, finding consolation in the narratives of al-Andalus. Therefore, because of the ideological underpinnings of such scholarship, narratives of a culture of tolerance between Muslims, Jews and Christians may at time be inaccurate, although they offer us insight into the importance of such historiographic projections. Examples include Maria Rose Menocal, *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain* (Boston: Little Brown, 2002).

To understand how the inscribed poem in the paintings functions to conjure a historical past, it is useful to consult Lotman's chapter on 'The Symbol in the Cultural System' where he states

a reminiscence, a reference, a quotation are organic parts of the new text, functioning only in its synchrony. They pass from the text into the depths of memory whereas a symbol passes from the depths of memory into the text'⁴⁵⁴.

As the quoted text, or in the case of the 'Homage' paintings, the inscribed 'qafiyya' poem, passes into the depths of memory, it takes the reader back to a specific moment in time and specific space in the past. The 'qafiyya' becomes a quotation and passes into the memory of the reader as it has been canonised and concretised by cultural memory and literary history, and immersed in the Ibn Zaydun – Wallada love affair; hence, the poem brings with it the nostalgic baggage of al-Andalus. In the way that the reference to Ibn Zaydun in the title plays with the images in the paintings and the poem, another layer is added so that the narrative of Ibn Zaydun complicates that memory, and creates a new one.

The memory of the 'qafiyya' poem

The 'qafiyya' was written as an ode to Wallada, daughter of Cordoban caliph, al-Mustakfi. The history of the love between Ibn Zaydun and Wallada has been documented as that of intense passion, followed by bitterness as outlined above.⁴⁵⁵

⁴⁵⁴ Yuri M. Lotman, *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture* (New York: I.B Tauris, 2001), p. 105.

⁴⁵⁵ Ahmad Ibn Muhammad Maqqari, *Nafh al-Tib: Min Ghusn al-Andalus al-Raatib* (Cairo: al-Maktabah al-Tijaariyah al-Kubra, 1949). Ibn Bassam, *al-Dahira fi Mahasin Ahl al-Gazira* (Cairo:

This love affair became legendary and a source of great inspiration of other love narratives and poetry in Arabic literature. Al-Maqqari's lyrical tone when writing of the Ibn Zaydun-Wallada love affair, has added to the intensity and romance of the narration.⁴⁵⁶

As well as playing on the poet's legendary love affair with the princess Wallada Bint al-Mustakfi, al-Nasiri is making a nostalgic reference to the golden age of al-Andalus, where subjects of various ethnic, religious and racial communities lived harmoniously amongst each other and with nature, establishing a great civilisation in Europe.⁴⁵⁷ This nostalgia projects an optimistic vision for the future⁴⁵⁸. In so doing, al-Nasiri resists the dark veil of bloodshed caused by the greed over Iraq's oil.

The use of myth in the analysis here is understood and used semiotically in the Barthesian sense to mean an extended metaphor that enables a deeper more conceptualised understanding of culture, 'a mode of signification'⁴⁵⁹ which is not confined to the written word, but is also found in other forms of representation such as photography, cinema, reporting, sport and shows. According to Barthes, 'myth is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things: in it things lose the memory

Matba'at lagnat al-ta'lif wa-l-targama wa-l-nashr, 1939), v. 1, part 1, p. 378, referenced in Malti-Douglas, 'Ibn Zaydun', p. 66.

⁴⁵⁶ See Ahmad ibn Muhammad al-Maqqari, *Nafh al-tib: min ghusn al-Andalus al-ratib* (al-Qahirah: al-Maktabah al-Tijariyah al-Kubra, 1949) for this.

⁴⁵⁷ Michael Frishkopf, 'Contemporary Egyptian Music', in *Mediterranean Mosaic: Popular Music and Global Sounds*, ed. by Goffredo Plastino (London; New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 152. See also Hossam Aboul-Ela, 'Past rhetorics', *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 425 (1999); Richard Woffenden, and Mohammed Mitwalli, 'They have announced the death of Nizar Qabbani', *Cairo Times*, 2.7 (1998); Rashad Selim, 'Diaspora, Departure and Remains', in *Strokes of Genius*, p. 58; and Elinson, *Looking Back at al-Andalus*. Note this was not the case politically where struggles between different parties are always taking place. For more on this see Mahmoud Makki, 'The Political History of al-Andalus (92/711-897/1492) in *The Legacy of Muslim Spain*, ed. by Salma Khadra Jayyusi and Manuela Marin, Vol. 1 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992), pp. 3-87.

⁴⁵⁸ For more on nostalgia and how nostalgia can be retrospective as well as prospective, see Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

⁴⁵⁹ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Vintage, 1993), p. 109.

that they once were made⁴⁶⁰. Thus, Wallada here constitutes a myth as the memory of how she has been constructed as Ibn Zaydun's lost beloved. It is no longer questioned how this myth has been generated in the popular cultural imagination, and neither is it questioned if and how the relationship itself actually existed. The story of Wallada as a myth, as such becomes a natural fact. Thus, when interviewing al-Nasiri and questioning him about whether or not Wallada was in fact as beautiful as the way she is represented in historical texts and literature, he replied with 'Of course she was!'⁴⁶¹, as if it is something not to be questioned. As Wallada's beauty symbolises the beauty of Baghdad and Iraq as a whole, then the myth of Wallada is a necessary construct. Without it, the metaphor of 'Wallada as Baghdad' simply cannot exist. Myths become necessary for the formation of nostalgic depictions. Without myths made relevant to the present they no longer are capable of creating narratives of the future.

Thus there are three myths of Wallada that occur to the viewer: al-Maqqari's text *Nafh al-Tib* is the first to record her supposedly exceptional physical characteristics and her accomplishment in the Written and Spoken Word. The second contribution to the myth of Wallada is Ibn Zaydun's poetry, which always complimented her physical features. A third one is al-Nasiri's depiction of an image of a lute player whom al-Nasiri associates with Wallada, taken from a history book,⁴⁶² which in turn was obscured by layers of paint. Al-Nasiri's paintings could be indicating the instability of historical narratives, manuscripts and reformulated memories about female beauty, used as a prism to imagine the beauty of a 'land'.

⁴⁶⁰ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Vintage, 1993), p. 142.

⁴⁶¹ Rafa al-Nasiri, Interview with the present author, June 2012.

⁴⁶² Al-Nasiri told me that the image of the lute player was taken from a history book about al-Andalus. He refused to give me more information about the source of the image. I associate this with his sceptical approach towards manuscripts, taking them out of their original context and breathing unto them a new, contemporary spirit. Although history is a site of nostalgia, there still is a conscious distancing away from the didactic pressure that such memories may have on the contemporary imagination.

Memories of al-Andalus

The beauty of Andalusian Spain, the Western edge of Arabic/Islamic civilisation, is symbolically imagined as a golden age of civil harmony and peace. This cultural memory of al-Andalus, as revived through the poem, becomes a site of resistance rather than a real geography. As al-Andalus and Madinat al-Zahra are conflated here, we are dealing with a memory twice removed. Firstly, the memory of al-Andalus and specifically Madinat al-Zahra relies on literature such as Ibn Zaydun's poetry. Secondly, even Ibn Zaydun's poetry itself looks at a lost space of beauty and innocent love.

Thus in honouring the memory of Ibn Zaydun, one of al-Andalus' greatest poets, and dedicating the paintings to him, al-Nasiri is using Ibn Zaydun's memory of Madinat al-Zahra and al-Andalus symbolically and iconically – through inscribing his actual poem – to capture the spirit of a celebration of life's zest and beauty as an alternative to the morbid political and social reality of Iraq after years of sanctions, wars and civil strife.

The Beauty of Memory and the Memory of Beauty: Wallada

This beauty is remembered in cultural memory, not just in Ibn Zaydun's poem, but also in al-Maqqari's writings. For the purpose of this thesis, I will concentrate on identifying how the memory of Wallada as a symbol of beauty is constructed to strengthen al-Nasiri's resistance strategies in the poem.

Wallada is not only the intended audience of Ibn Zaydun's poem, printed onto the canvas, but images of a female lute player are also printed which may suggest Wallada herself. Using Peirce's concept of signs that function indexically and non-arbitrarily,⁴⁶³ we could argue that the relationship between the Wallada-lute player and the poem is indeed indexical; the poem, in detailing the love Ibn Zaydun has for Wallada, indexically alludes to Wallada, the figure of whom we are presented with in some of the paintings according to al-Nasiri.

In the paintings which have an image of a lute player, we could accurately say that the lute player is an icon. In adopting an iconic reading of the lute player we could say that this is what a lute player actually looked like. What adds to this is that al-Nasiri has stated that the lute player is in fact Wallada bint al-Mustakfi. Using Peirce's notion of the 'intentional interpretant'⁴⁶⁴, al-Nasiri has determined the interpretant of the lute player image-sign to be Wallada. Yet from the paintings, the identity does not get totally clear; Wallada as well as Ibn Zaydun could be identified as the lute player. The 'effectual interpretant' thus differs from the intentional one. What I propose is that al-Nasiri's Wallada-lute player functions iconically, but also, that the poem by Ibn Zaydun – which has served to concretise the phoenix of Madinat al-Zahra's beauty – indicates the distortion of her image.

Looking at how Wallada is evoked in the poem, the memories of Wallada the beloved and Madinat al-Zahra as place merge. It could thus be said that the poem is about the experience of a place, the way in which the natural and built environments are perceived and described, through the romantic relationship of the poet. In other

⁴⁶³ Pierce, p. 9 quoted in Bal, 'Seeing Signs', p. 76.

⁴⁶⁴ The intentional interpretant according to Peirce is that 'which is a determination of the mind of the utterer'. On the other hand, the effectual interpretant is that 'which is a determination of the mind of the interpreter'. For more see 'Excerpts from Letters to Lady Wellby', Spring 1906 in Charles Sanders Peirce, *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings (1867-1893)*, ed. by Christian Kloesel, Nathan Houser, et. al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), pp. 477-8.

words, the poet's relationship with Wallada informed and strongly coloured his experience and perception of Madinat al-Zahra and Cordoba. Moreover, the natural surroundings are personified, empathising with the poetic speaker and becoming 'sick'. The longing for the place becomes erotic as exemplified in the lines

وَالْأَفْقُ طَلَقَ وَمَرَأَى الْأَرْضَ قَدْ رَاقَا
كَأَنَّهُ رَقَّ لِي فَاعْتَلَّ إِشْفَاقَا

إِنِّي ذَكَرْتُكَ بِالزَّهْرَاءِ مُشْتَاقَا
وَلِلنَّسِيمِ اعْتِلَالٌ، فِي أَصَانِلِهِ

*I remember you in az-Zahra 'longing for you,
and the horizon was bright and the aspect of the
earth was clear*

*The breeze was sick in its evening hours,
as if it pitied me, so it was sick out of pity.*⁴⁶⁵

In the paintings, this conflation of self and nature of the poem is met with a conflation of text and image. We are not able to discern every word in the single lines from the poem, neither are we able to see the complete figure of the lute player. Despite this, the layering itself can easily be discerned: the black paint that permeates the upper region of Figures 3.2.1, 3.3.2 and 3.2.4 symbolically suggests the darkness prevailing in Iraq as a result of the scramble for oil. This darkness⁴⁶⁶ has stifled the image of the lute player so that it is barely visible. Hence the lyricism and harmony of the symbolised musical instrument is still visible under the rubble of horror and death.

Al-Nasiri's employment of this specific poem in the series connotes the central theme of people's experiences with the natural world through lived

⁴⁶⁵ Ibn Zaydun, 'Ini thakartuki fil zahra' mushtaq, *Diwan wa rasa'il*, ed. by Ali Abd al-Azim (Cairo: [n. pub.]: 1957), p. 139, trans. by Sieglunde Lug in Lug, *Poetic Techniques and Conceptual Elements in Ibn Zaydun's Love Poetry* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1982), p. 120. Fadwa Malti-Douglas has made a thematic analysis of this poem in her article 'Ibn Zaydun: Towards a Thematic Analysis', *Arabica*, 23.1 (1976), pp. 63-76, ll. 1-2

⁴⁶⁶ Darkness and light as related to Sufism are discussed in Laleh Bakhtiar, 'Sufi Symbolism and the Mystic Quest' and Sholeh Johnston, 'Heech: Poems in Three Dimensions: Parviz Tanavoli's Sculptures of Nothingness', both in *Sufi*, 82 (2012), pp. 30-31 and pp. 32-35 respectively. See also Laleh Bakhtiar, *Sufi: Expressions of the Mystic Quest* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976).

experiences, the painful experience of separation of lovers, hence the imagined Wallada. But going hand in hand with this separation is a continued passion, almost transgressing the constrictions of time and place. It is as if the beauty of the word, of the song is resisting this darkness, this separation, the destruction brought about by continued strife and unjustified war. Found in Figure 3.3.5, the final line of the poem is repeated twice:

فَالآنَ أَحْمَدُ مَا كُنَّا لِعَهْدِكُمْ سَلَوْتُمْ وَبَقِينَا نَحْنُ عَشَاقًا

*And now -- I praise how we kept your pact --
you consoled yourself while we remained yearning*⁴⁶⁷

It is interesting that Ibn Zaydun uses the plural pronoun ‘we’ and the plural form *salawtumu*. If we take this literally, Ibn Zaydun is paradoxically suggesting a love relationship that is beyond time and space; which Wallada has diverted herself from and has moved on from. Regardless of the physical separation, Ibn Zaydun still has managed to state that they ‘remain lovers’. ‘We’ could also have been a literary use of ‘I’, since in Arabic poetry the self is often referred to as ‘We’. Taking ‘we’ in Arabic literally, the iconic presence of the Wallada-lute player could indexically suggest that al-Nasiri positions Ibn Zaydun as not being alone in lamenting the departure. Music becomes a symbolic refuge, creating a harmony between music and poetry, Wallada and Ibn Zaydun, iconic images and indexical words.

Using the trope of memory, even though Wallada, and even Madinat al-Zahra and al-Andalus have undergone great changes, Ibn Zaydun still wants to hold onto past emotions and relationships. The evocation of a bitter-sweet memory is reignited in this contemporary context, where even lovers of Baghdad remain faithful to the

⁴⁶⁷ Ibn Zaydun, ‘Ini thakartuki fil zahra’ in Lug, *Poetic Techniques*, p. 121, l. 15

memory of its beauty, regardless of the looting and plundering that continues to destroy it.

Memories of Abbasid art traditions and their political appropriation

As well as the ancient myths of Mesopotamia and al-Andalus, the miniature paintings of Yahya Ibn Mahmud al-Wasiti living in the Abbasid 13th century were used by the Iraqi political elite since the 1950s to select and fashion memories of Abbasid Iraq.⁴⁶⁸ Instigated by Jewad Selim's notion of 'istilham al-turath' (revival of tradition), Selim brought the French journal *Illustrations*, which contained small reproductions of al-Wasiti's *Maqamat*⁴⁶⁹ back to Iraq. These were commissioned by the then Director of Antiquities, Sati al-Husri (1882 – 1968)⁴⁷⁰, to create larger versions of the reproductions of the *Maqamat*.

These reproductions of a reproduction were to have a significant impact on modern Iraqi art. Born in Wasit, south of present-day Iraq, al-Wasiti was canonised in the art traditions of Iraq and the Arab world⁴⁷¹, due to the fact that his manuscript, *Maqamat al-Hariri* (1237), is the only one to have survived with the name of its

⁴⁶⁸ In writing about the story of the Abbasid caliphs and their court in the eight and ninth centuries, Hugh Kennedy informs us that 'the Arabic chronicles on which our reconstructions of the past depend use narrative and anecdote throughout to make points and illuminate personalities. The Abbasid bureaucracy certainly produced large quantities of documents [...] However, virtually all of these are lost beyond hope of recovery. We must rely on the literary sources to reconstruct the history of this civilisation' in Hugh Kennedy, 'Forward', in *When Baghdad Ruled the Muslim World: The Rise and Fall of Islam's Greatest Dynasty* (First Da Capo Press ed. Cambridge, Mass.: Da Capo Press, 2005), p. xx. Later centuries of the Abbasid caliphate are also narrated to us through chronicles. See Amira K Bennison, *The Great Caliphs: The Golden Age of the 'Abbasid Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) for later period of Abbasid history.

⁴⁶⁹ Nada Shabout, "'Presenting" Iraqi Visual Culture', in *Dafatir: Contemporary Iraqi Book Art*, ed. by Nada M. Shabout (Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 2007), p. 22.

⁴⁷⁰ For more on Sati al-Husri in Iraq see Eric Davis, 'The Museum and the Politics of Social Control in Modern Iraq', in *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*, ed. by John R. Gillis (Princeton: New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 90-104.

⁴⁷¹ Venetia Porter, *The Art of Hajj* (London: The British Museum Press, 2012), p. 19 calls it 'one of the masterpieces of Arab painting'.

scribe.⁴⁷² The artists of the 1980s were to interpret and use this influence differently, as Dia al-Azzawi, who had left Iraq to live in London in 1976, suggests after he gained access to the original *Maqamat* manuscript.⁴⁷³

Therefore, there is an interesting relationship with the 1980s generation, who were more critical of the revival of artistic traditions, and the *Maqamat*. In addition to painting illustrations of al-Hariri's maqama,⁴⁷⁴ al-Wasiti occasionally added his own additional marginal notes to the manuscript page (shown in red to the on the left of the manuscript page in Figure 3.2.3) expanding on al-Hariri's writing. The artists of the 1980s sought a different relationship between words and images in their art. I will expand more on this theme of the relationship between words and images in al-Nasiri's art below, but suffice it to say here that the artists of al-Nasiri's generation rejected the illustrative use of images in relation to writing.

The literary maqamat themselves, written by Abu Muhammad al-Qasim al-Hariri (1054 - 1122), are valuable examples of a rise in a new fictional Arabic literary genre, combining linguistic and stylistic high form with popular and local themes and

⁴⁷² Alain George, 'Orality, Writing and the Image in the *Maqamat*: Arabic Illustrated Books in Context', *Art History*, 35.1 (2012), p. 35, f.n. 42 and 44. The Arabe 5847 manuscript was the only manuscript with its illustrator and scribe's name on it. See also Oleg Grabar, *The Illustrated Manuscript* (Chicago; London: Chicago University Press, 1984), pp. 10-11.

⁴⁷³ Nada Shabout, "'Presenting" Iraqi Visual Culture', p. 22.

⁴⁷⁴ Bernard O'Kane's research on Medieval literary Arabic manuscripts has shown that writing is meant to describe the painting in order to guide the viewer's vision. Both Anna Contadini and Venetia Porter argue that al-Wasiti's illustrations reflect the written narrative of the maqama. Oleg Grabar however is not quite so sure of this, offering another option of the reading al-Wasiti's images as commentaries or interpretations in themselves, and not simply descriptive. I would argue that whilst the descriptive potential of images to words may be a possible reading of al-Wasiti's *Maqamat al-Hariri* or even of Ottoman tiles of al-Haramayn as Charlotte Maury maintains, for the contemporary art of Iraq this is certainly not the case. Images bear extremely complex and multi-layered relationships to words which is one of the main arguments presented in this thesis. For more see Bernard O'Kane, 'The Uses of Captions in Medieval Literary Arabic Manuscripts', in *Arab Painting: Text and Image in Illustrated Arabic Manuscripts*, ed. by Anna Contadini (Brill, 2006), pp. 135-144; Venetia Porter, 'The *Mahmul* Revisited', in *The Hajj: Collected Essays*, ed. by Venetia Porter and Liana Saif (London: British Museum, 2013), pp. 195-205 [see p. 198, f.n. 26 for Contadini's explanation of the illustration]; Charlotte Maury, 'Depictions of the Haramayn in Ottoman Tiles: Content and Context', in *The Hajj*, pp. 143-159; and Oleg Grabar, 'Pictures or Commentaries: The Illustrations of the *Maqamat* of al Hariri', in *Islamic Visual Culture 1100-1800*, ed. by Oleg Grabar (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 187-205.

stories⁴⁷⁵, signalling shifts in classical court culture, where the *maqama* was needed to explore other forms of literary merit as well as the classical *qasida* poem⁴⁷⁶. This literary form found its way into the Andalusī Arabic writings of Abu al-Tahir Yusuf al-Saraqusti (d. 1143), showing how cultural expressions travel geographically and historically.

Al-Hariri, living at about the same time as Ibn Zaydun himself⁴⁷⁷, was part of networks of cultural exchange between the eastern Islamic centre, Baghdad, and the western Muslim centre, al-Andalus. Rina Drory has noted how

educated Andalusis frequently travelled to the East in search of such scholarly merchandise, studying under prominent authorities in different fields and gaining authorization to transmit the texts thus acquired.⁴⁷⁸

Al-Andalus became a place where literature flourished, not just among the Arabs, but also among the Christians and Jews of the region as well, with the latter also adapting the *maqama* genre. Al-Andalus was not simply a mirror of the eastern Islamic world, but actively engaged with it through cultural exchange and revival in literary discourse, transforming the literary genre through intellectual rigour and insight.

⁴⁷⁵ Alexander Elinson, 'Weeping Over the Poetic Past: Poetry into Prose in al-Saraqusti's *Qayrawan Maqama*', in *Looking Back at al-Andalus*, p. 51. See also, Wolf Hart Heinrichs, 'Prosimetrical Genres in Classical Arabic Literature', in *Prosimetrum: Crosscultural Perspectives on Narrative in Prose and Fiction*, ed. by Joseph Harris and Karl Reich (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997), pp. 262-266; Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila, *Maqama: A History of a Genre* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2002); and Abdelfattah Kilito, *Al-gha'ib: dirasa fi maqama li al-Hariri* (al-Dar al-Bayda'. 1987).

⁴⁷⁶ Elinson, 'Weeping', p. 57.

⁴⁷⁷ Between the years of al-Hariri's birth (1054) and Ibn Zaydun's death (1071) there are 17 years.

⁴⁷⁸ Rina Drory, 'The *Maqama*', in *The Literature of al-Andalus*, ed. by María Rosa Menocal, Raymond P. Scheindlin and Michael Sells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 193-4. The *maqama* thus found its way into Andalusī culture, although it developed its own independent form. 'Andalusī court *maqamat* entirely abandoned specific Eastern characteristics such as the mendicancy theme, two constant protagonists, scheme-based plots, and final exposure. They even relinquished intertextuality and overt referent (whether serious or caricaturing) to established literary models, so intrinsic to Eastern-type *maqamat*.' Drory, 'The *Maqama*', p. 196.

Despite this dispersal of cultural expression, Saddam's regime found a great need to create a connection between the narrative of the 'greatness' of the Iraqi nation, implementing a cultural policy that enabled a

specifically Iraqi national history [to be constructed] that emphasised local Iraqi patriotism, as opposed to the original amalgamative pan-Arabism of the Ba'th party.⁴⁷⁹

Thus, through al-Wasiti's manuscripts of al-Hariri's *maqamat*, the literary form of the *maqama* became part of a politically determined cultural space, isolating what initially was a proliferation of cultural forms, into a nationally prescribed sovereign cultural agenda. In order to make constructed memory part of a collective memory, a revival of the memory of al-Wasiti involved the establishment of the 'Wasiti Festival' in 1972 in which Iraq first hosted an international arts gathering, which was part of Iraqi state propaganda as to display the vestiges of Iraq's 'glorious' art heritage. Also in memory of al-Wasiti was *al-Wasiti*, a visual arts publication, first issued in 1993. This isolated the flowing waters of cultural osmosis into the sovereign frontiers of Iraqi nationalism.

⁴⁷⁹ Achim Rohde, 'Arts and Politics', in *State-Society Relations in Ba'thist Iraq: Facing Dictatorship* (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 126.



Figure 3.2.3

Alharith joins a caravan to Mecca and meets Abu Zayd along the way, fols 94v-95r from the Maqamat of al-Hariri,

Written and illustrated by Yahya al-Wasiti

Baghdad, Iraq, 634 AH/ AD 1237

Opaque watercolour, ink and gold on paper

39 x 34 x 5.5 cm

Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris

Courtesy of the British Museum

This revival of an Abbasid painter in the modern Iraqi consciousness is what Nada Shabout calls ‘inherent in the modern creation of states [...] the need to identify unique characteristics of difference’⁴⁸⁰. She continues,

Following World War II, the decline of colonialism, the euphoria of nationalism, and the newly independent Arab states generated a sense of national consciousness that served as catalysts for artists. This consciousness, in turn, led to a desire to identify the features of an Arab national art, forcing artists to confront their cultural paradox. It was then that a modern Arab art distinct from its past Islamic artistic heritage, as well as from its imported Western models, began to emerge. Although the enthusiastic organised efforts of art groups of the 1950s and 1960s had ended, individual artists continued to explore their cultural roots, which extended beyond their Islamic past.⁴⁸¹

Despite what the artists were calling for, the government still supported art which sought to revive older art forms. Even in one of the most well circulated art journals, *al-Riwaq*⁴⁸², the subjects of al-Wasiti and Islamic art forms continued to be articulated in the contributions.⁴⁸³ Like an archaeologist, Saddam sought to show that ‘his’ Iraq nation was a nation with a long history of art and culture. His patronage of the arts can be seen as an indication of his attempt to put Iraq back on the map as a

⁴⁸⁰ Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*, p. 146. See also Shakir Hasan al-Sa’id talks at length of the importance of al-Wasiti in modern Iraqi art. See Shakir Hasan al-Sa’id, *Fusul min Tarikh al-Haraka al-Tashkiliyya fi-l-‘Iraq* (Baghdad: Da’irat al-Shu’un al-Thaqafiyya wa-l-Nashr, 1983).

⁴⁸¹ Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*, p. 147.

⁴⁸² *Al-Riwaq* was published in Baghdad 1978 - 1986, and Iraqi artist Nuri al-Rawi (1925 - 2014) was its first secretary. It is interesting to see that the quality of paper started to deteriorate and the use of black and white images began to appear in the early 1980s. There may be a connection here with the Iran-Iraq War, where government funding of the visual arts, and culture in general, significantly nose dived.

⁴⁸³ Articles which show artists’ support for the Iran-Iraq war, and for a projection of Iraqi nationalist sentiment can be seen in Ilyas Farah, ‘al-khususiyya al-wataniyya fi-l-fann’, *Al-Riwaq*, 14 (Baghdad: Iraqi Ministry of Media and Culture, 1983), pp. 4-7; and Shawkat al-Rubai’i, ‘al-Khususiyya al-qawmiyya fi-l-fann al-tashkili al-‘arabi’, *Al-Riwaq*, 6 (Baghdad: Iraqi Ministry of Media and Culture, 1979), pp. 2-5. Other articles were published in *Al-Riwaq* on al-Wasiti such as Buland al-Haidari, ‘Al-Wasiti: Khasa’is al-madrassa al-Baghdadiyya’, *Al-Riwaq*, 5 (Baghdad: Iraqi Ministry of Media and Culture, 1979), pp. 8-13, and Jamal Hashim Ali, ‘Al-Wasiti fi mahrajanihi a-thalith: al-itala al-jadida fi zaman al-harb’, *Al-Riwaq*, 15 (Baghdad: Iraqi Ministry of Media and Culture, 1984), pp. 56-59.

major world power, not completely dissimilar to its status as a leading centre for art and culture during the peak of Abbasid rule during the former half of the thirteenth century when Baghdad was a great centre for learning and a symbol of great military prowess.⁴⁸⁴ This seemingly well-organised cultural project arose out of competition with other political groups, especially during the 1970s when there was a need to build a new state led by the single Ba'ath party, and then later by Saddam Hussein himself in the 1980s.

Along with the realisation that intellectuals could influence the masses, Saddam's regime tried hard to win over many with numerous cultural platforms, including high-quality journals in London, fashion directorates, schools for ballet and music, and refined cultural centres to enlist the cooperation of intellectuals of every inclination and temperament. Indeed, many artists and writers were proudly involved in these forms as manifestations of their 'good taste' and a desired 'Iraqiness'. Especially prior to the war with Iran (1980-88) except for the backlash against organised communist writers, the cultural scene had the glittering façade of refinement and tolerance. The enormous effort to have a dynamic cultural infrastructure won the appreciation of both Iraqis and the international community.⁴⁸⁵

But resistance to the state's nationalist strategy has involved a complex reworking of al-Wasiti. Suad al-Attar's art (1942-)⁴⁸⁶ and Shakir Hasan al-Sa'id's Iraqi art history books *al-Fann al-tashkili al-Iraqi al-mu'asir* and *Fusul min tarikh al-*

⁴⁸⁴ Bennison, *The Great Caliphs*.

⁴⁸⁵ Muhsin al-Musawi, *Reading Iraq: Culture and Power in Conflict* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2005), p. xiii.

⁴⁸⁶ Suad al-Attar (1942-) is an Iraqi artist working in painting and etching. Her indebtedness to al-Wasiti is most explicit in her paintings of palm trees, plants, calligraphy as well as her profuse use of blue in her earlier works. See Lulwa al-Hammud, 'Rihla ila dakhil Su'ad al-'Attar...Huzn al-Ghurba yuwladu fanna', *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* (13 June 2003) <<http://archive.aawsat.com/details.asp?issueno=8800&article=176387#.VW2ZkZgt3dk>> [Accessed 2 May 2014].

haraka al-tashkiliyya fi al-Iraq document the importance of al-Wasiti in Iraqi cultural memory⁴⁸⁷.

Although al-Nasiri was influenced by this revival, he forges an independent link to al-Wasiti, distancing himself from the idea that he would contribute to a bordered national art culture. Instead, by reinserting an Andalusí poem into his work – which had been appropriated to fit the Arabic literary canon, and which was penned down during al-Andalus' imagined cultural flourishing – much like al-Wasiti's Baghdad has been imagined as a place of cultural innovation, al-Nasiri participates in 'border-crossing'. Although the series here shows a similar fascination with al-Wasiti's⁴⁸⁸ use of vivid colours and his illustration of al-Hariri's *maqamat*⁴⁸⁹, al-Nasiri chooses to print the Andalusí Arabic poem by Ibn Zaydun, rather than illustrate the written text as al-Wasiti does in his *Maqamat*. As such al-Nasiri plays with the visual symbols of Ibn Zaydun's poem, distorting its legibility in a stance against the hegemonisation of literature in miniature paintings. In al-Nasiri's works, the relationship between words and images is complicated, decentering the mimesis of iconic forms. Rather, all semiotic forms and ways of communicating semiotically unite under the canonical umbrella of Ibn Zaydun – both as a poet and as a symbol of Islamic Andalusí imagined peace and harmony – to create a nostalgic projection of a peaceful Iraq.

⁴⁸⁷ Considering that *Fusul* was commissioned by the Iraqi Minister of Culture and Information, and that al-Sa'id himself penned and signed a personal dedication to 'he who enabled the revival of the contemporary Arab [...] the leader-President Saddam Hussein', we cannot separate the realms of art and politics. al-Sa'id, *Fusul*, p. 5. See also Al-Sa'id, *al-fann al-tashkili al-iraqi al-mu'asir* (Tunis: The Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organisation, 1992), pp. 56-7.

⁴⁸⁸ Meem Gallery, 'Art in Iraqi Today IV' exhibition catalogue, 2011.

⁴⁸⁹ In Oleg Grabar, 'Pictures or Commentaries: The Illustration of the *Maqamat* of al-Hariri', in *Islamic Art and Beyond, Volume III, Constructing the Study of Islamic Art*, (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2006), pp. 187-205, whether al-Wasiti's illustrations are to be read as interpretations of the written text of al-Hariri's *maqamat* or an exercise emphasising certain aspects of the written text.

The semiotic differences explained by a difference in the relationship between word and image, could be illustrated by using al-Wasiti as a referential point. The reference to al-Wasiti by al-Nasiri could indicate an idealised and romanticised conscious desire to posit his work on a larger cultural stage. As a result of the cultural initiatives undertaken by the state to remind Iraqis of the significance of al-Wasiti to Iraqi cultural heritage, artists felt a need to be identified with this discourse, and so instantly found consolation in declaring their affiliation with this larger and prestigious art history of the nation-state. On this connection, al-Nasiri states: ‘my artistic heritage is of paper and water colors, as in the works of Al-Wasiti and other original Arab painters’⁴⁹⁰.

In a reversal of al-Wasiti’s inscription and illustration of al-Hariri’s *maqamat* into a manuscript, al-Nasiri has the calligrapher Nasab inscribe Ibn Zaydun’s poem, as such making the poem’s language ambiguously ‘play with paint’.⁴⁹¹ In not being involved in the act of inscribing the calligraphy, but printing in onto the canvas, the distinction is made between calligrapher and artist. Whereas al-Wasiti was both calligrapher and illustrator in his *Maqamat*, al-Nasiri fuses ‘craftsmanship’⁴⁹²,

⁴⁹⁰ Al-Nasiri, *Dafatir: Contemporary Iraqi Book Art*, p. 69.

⁴⁹¹ May Muzaffar, email to the author, 17 July 2016.

⁴⁹² Muzaffar, email, ‘as you know [Salih Nasab’s] role was limited to his craftsmanship as a calligrapher, Rafa sends him the text and he gives it back written in Thuluth according to Rafa’s order. Then he makes use of it creatively’. On ‘high craftsmanship’, al-Nasiri calls it ‘an art in itself’, in *Dafatir*, p. 69. Using the *thuluth* style, where one third of each letter slopes with *harakat* used to beautify the written text, with origins in Ibn Muqla’s (885/6 - 940) and Ibn al-Bawwab’s authoritative treatise on penmanship, and developed by al-Ziftawi, al-Nasiri wanted to combine the fluid, but controlled script with the ambiguity of empty space and arbitrary brushstrokes. I will discuss this conflation of calligraphy as craftsmanship and as art below. For more on the *thuluth* script, see Ahmed Moustafa (artist) and Stefan Sperl, *The Cosmic Script: Sacred Geometry and the Science of Arabic Penmanship*, 1 (London: Thames and Hudson, 2014), pp. 170-3; and *Mawsuat al-Khat al-Arabi*, ed. by Kamil Salman al-Juburi (Beirut: Mansurat Dar wa-Maktabat al-Hilal, 1999-2000). For reasons for the proliferation of *thuluth* script during the tenth and eleventh centuries during the Abbasid caliphate, see Irvin Cemil Schick, ‘The Revival of *Kufi* Script during the Reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II’, in *Calligraphy and Architecture in the Muslim World*, ed. by Mohammad Gharipour and Irvin Cemil Schick (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), pp. 132-3.

printing and painting to blur the boundaries between modern art and calligraphy. This can be seen in light of his efforts to diffuse cultural hierarchies. It is not to make a

linguistic connotation, [but] to establish a kind of formal identification between nature and man; as well as between place and time. It is a sort of spiritual and mental exercise of the daily artistic creation of life.⁴⁹³

But where al-Wasiti employs what was then the popular literary genre of the *maqama*, Al-Nasiri has used an Andalusí poem, attributed to the corpus of the Arabic literary canon. Using this form of ‘high’ culture, al-Nasiri complicates the word-image dialogue, making the visual icons less loyal to the poem. This is in reversal of al-Wasiti’s images of al-Hariri’s *maqamat*. The usage of Ibn Zaydun’s ‘*qafiyya*’ with abstract visual symbols works to complicate reimaginings of a past world, intensifying its fragmentation in our imagination. Al-Wasiti does not engage with complications of cultural memory – providing what I argue to be a relatively visual illustration of al-Hariri’s *maqamat* – yet he employs iconic visual imagery in his manuscript. The images are iconic representations of the words on the page.

From Baghdad, hence the eastern part of the Islamic world, al-Wasiti inscribes al-Hariri’s *maqamat*. Al-Nasiri, living in exile in Jordan, more complicatedly uses poetry in resistance against the present violence in the east of the Islamic world. Unlike al-Wasiti, who gives visual form to written language, al-Nasiri explores the *symbols* of the poem to resist war by quoting passages of beauty from the Ibn Zaydun’s past and re-awaken the memory of the viewer/reader to envision an alternative future for Iraq based on these symbols. His visual adoption of red, black

⁴⁹³ Al-Nasiri, ‘My Visual Resources: Place and Time between East and West’, in *Rafa Nasiri: 50 Years of Printmaking*, p. 27.

and yellow acrylic paint makes complex use of those memories of the past, whereby the history of al-Andalus and the history of bloodshed in Iraq converge. Simultaneously, the histories of al-Andalus and Iraq are dissimilar and unique in their right.

Negotiating Chinese aesthetics

The use of ink and ‘brushstrokes of vigour’, the latter of which is used in the ‘Homage’ paintings, is a particular testament to al-Nasiri’s fascination with Qi Baishi’s (1864 – 1957) paintings⁴⁹⁴. The colours used, especially the blue in his earlier works, the profusion of empty spaces and the creative forgery of printed ‘texts’ are all inherited from Zhang Daqian (1899 – 1983)⁴⁹⁵. As the analysis below will show, al-Nasiri fuses the spirits of Chinese and Arabic aesthetic traditions, especially in the area of calligraphy to deconstruct the binaries of East and West.

The older Abbasid and modern Iraqi art traditions and paradigms that al-Nasiri is working against were strongly defined by the Western notion of ‘dividing human

⁴⁹⁴ For more on Qi Baishi, see I-Hsien Chu, *The Significance of Ch'i Pai-shih's Art* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1991); and I-yü Cho, *Chinese Aesthetics and Ch'i Pai-shih* (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Co., 1986).

⁴⁹⁵ When I asked al-Nasiri about specific Chinese artists who influenced his aesthetic vision, he showed me books about Chinese and Japanese calligraphy, and Zao Wou-Ki, the latter whom I will discuss later below. He has also been influenced by Zhang Daqian who made original improvements to original Chinese works of late-Ming and early-Qing periods. For example, he made considerable improvements to Bada Shanren’s *Thatched Hut of Great Cleanliness* which had been lost or destroyed much like al-Nasiri also tries to creatively recreate a lost and destroyed Baghdad through ambiguously using prints of Nasab’s calligraphy. The specific books which al-Nasiri showed me were Xiaoneng Yang, *Tracing the Past Drawing the Future: Master Ink Painters in Twentieth-Century China* (Milan; New York: 5 Continents Editions, 2010); Louise Boudonnat and Harumi Kushizaki, *Traces of the Brush: The Art of Japanese Calligraphy* (San Francisco: Seuil, 2003); Clare Pollard, *Zen Mind Zen Brush: Japanese Ink Paintings from the Gitter-Yelen Collection* (Sydney, London: The Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2006); Yves Bonnefoy and Gérard de Cortanze, *Zao Wou-Ki* (Paris: La Différence Enrico Navarra, 1998); and Bibliothèque Nationale de France, *Zao Wou-Ki: estampes et livres illustrés* (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 2008). For more on authenticity versus copying in Daqian’s art see Wen C. Fong, *Between Two Cultures: late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Chinese painting from the Robert H. Ellsworth Collection* (New York; New Haven: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2001), p. 184. See also Shen Fu and Jan Stuart, *Challenging the Past: The Paintings of Chang Dai-chien* (Washington D.C.; Seattle: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, 1991).

history into premodern, modern and postmodern epochs'⁴⁹⁶, whereby the dichotomy between tradition and modernity was antagonised.

Another fundamental feature of Western modernity in Western art and literature, which influenced his teachers both in Iraq and China, is that of an 'aesthetic modernity as set against the materialistic modernity of bourgeois society'⁴⁹⁷. Through Ibn Zaydun's poem, lines and words from which he repeats on the canvas several times, such as in 'ishraqa', the references to the East are unmistakable. If aesthetic modernity is associated with Western Europe, then al-Nasiri's symbolic and written references to the East are a poetic resistance to that.

To understand how al-Nasiri disorders oppositional categories in his series of paintings, it is first essential to study the Chinese avant-garde movement. It is through an appreciation of this movement and their works one can appreciate the richness of al-Nasiri's works in how they 'merge characteristics of [postmodern to modern and postmodern] periods, adopting them in hybrid forms, and often using incompatible elements at the same time'.⁴⁹⁸ As I will show below, al-Nasiri's employment of the memory of al-Andalus is not simply an appropriation of tradition, as the Western art historical notion would have it, but rather influenced by Chinese intellectual thought and art practices.

Unfortunately, all literature about al-Nasiri fails to deeply engage with the Chinese influences in his art, although it is briefly touched upon.⁴⁹⁹ Rather than draw

⁴⁹⁶ Minglu Gao, *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth Century Chinese Art* (Cambridge, Mass.; MIT Press, 2011), p. 2.

⁴⁹⁷ Gao, *Total Modernity*, p. 2.

⁴⁹⁸ Gao, *Total Modernity*, p. 2.

⁴⁹⁹ For example, in Maria Vivero, 'Rafa Nasiri's Profound Understanding of his Purpose and Place in Humanity is the Essence that Nurtures his Passion to Create Works in Earnest Beauty', in *Rafa Nasiri: 50 Years of Printmaking* (Milano: Skira, 2013), p. 18, a connection is made between al-Nasiri and Zen, but this identification fails to develop further. Faruqi also leaves the relationship between the two as mere descriptions and biographical information, in Faruqi, 'Reconfiguring Identity in Modern Iraqi Art', p. 57.

connections with Chinese calligraphyism, al-Nasiri has often been written about as a ‘hurufiyya’⁵⁰⁰ artist because of his use of the Arabic script in his abstract art. The ‘hurufiyya’ movement is an Iraqi appraisal of the Arabic script in visual art. Venetia Porter relates contemporary Arab art that uses the Arabic word to a straddle between Islamic art forms and the modern Western visual art scene:

[Artists] whose art showed that a distinctive ‘modern’ art was emerging in the region [...] sometimes used elements of the stylistic vocabulary of ‘Islamic’ art, but they differed from its traditions in terms of materials, techniques and formats, using [those] specifically associated with Western art traditions [...] They created new genres that owed much to international artistic schools of the twentieth and twenty first centuries, but were unmistakably informed by views of their own artistic traditions and heritage.⁵⁰¹

Although Porter is correct to assert that modern artists of the Arab region were increasingly exposed to Western art traditions and international art schools, there were also artists who sought alternative modes of knowledge as inspiration.

Al-Nasiri’s art is testament to this, which I will analyse in detail below. To do so, Minglo Gao’s detailed engagement with twentieth century Chinese intellectual history offers us a more useful prism for thinking about how al-Nasiri transcends the boundaries and hegemonies of Iraqi politics and aesthetics, which manipulate,

⁵⁰⁰ The hurufiyya movement was founded by artist Mahida Omar (1908 – 2005), influencing Shakir Hasan al-Sa’id’s *al-Bu’d al-Wahid* (One Dimension) Group. ‘Hurufiyya’, *Tate.org.uk*, 2016 <<http://www.tate.org.uk/learn/online-resources/glossary/h/Hurufiyya>> [accessed 16 June 2016]. Dia al-Azzawi states that the *hurufiyya* movement led to a superficial engagement with the Arabic alphabet, simply to create an identitarian link with Arabic culture, rather than create a literary link to ‘create a spiritual atmosphere’. See Shabout, “‘Presenting’ Iraqi Visual Culture”, pp. 22-3; Saddam al-Jumaily, ‘al-Marji’iyyat al-‘Ula lil Kitab al-Fanni al-Mu’asir fil-‘Iraq: Thakirat al-Tadwin’, in *Fa’iliyyat al-Khitab al-Jamali: Tatbiqat fi al-Tashkil al-‘Iraqi* (Jordan: Adib Books, 2012), pp. 91-102; and ‘The One Dimension’, in Modern Art Iraq Archive, Item #39, <<http://artiraq.org/maia/items/show/39>> [accessed July 17 2016].

⁵⁰¹ Venetia Porter, *Word into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East* (London: British Museum Press, 2006), p. 15.

construct and recycle cultural memories. For instance, Gao's study of Cai Yuanpei (1868 – 1940) allows us to understand that just as

Chinese modern and contemporary art is fundamentally concerned with how to integrate art and social projects, and how to fuse the benefits of a modern environment with a deeper understand of current living space, in order to create a totality: a totality that can merge culture, aesthetics, and life as a whole⁵⁰².

So can we understand al-Nasiri's art as an artistic commitment to create an aesthetic totality that can merge the culture and aesthetics of the Arab world – in its pre-Islamic, Islamic and modern forms – with that of the West and Far East, hence of China.

This totality is unlike the 'imagined totality' of nationalism or the global. Rather, the totality is more compatible with Spivak's planetarity, which allows for differences beyond identitarian politics. This planetarity is to create a better living space in Iraq, and to resist the oppression and violence in contemporary Iraq based on sectarian and ethnic politics.

Another aspect of Gao's reading useful to appreciating al-Nasiri's paintings is his insight into Hu Shi (1891 - 1962), a cultural figure of the New Cultural Movement of early twentieth century China who combined the principles of early-twentieth century American pragmatism with traditional Confucian pragmatism.⁵⁰³ Shi's pragmatism was a principle of seeking truth in modern society where

the truth is nothing more than a tool for dealing with the environment. As the environment changes, the truth changes with it. The real knowledge needed by

⁵⁰² Gao, *Total Modernity*, p. 3.

⁵⁰³ Gao, *Total Modernity*, p. 3.

humanity is not absolute principle and reason, but rather particular time, specific space, and the truth of mine.⁵⁰⁴

Through breaking down absolutist notions of time and place, truth becomes rather about specific histories and geographies, and personal, subjective truths. This is the real knowledge that is needed in order to reconstruct the environment in the collective imagination, according to Chinese principles of modernity.

I believe that 'Homage' is a work that strongly testifies to al-Nasiri's paralleling of Chinese modernity by striving to explore a truth necessary to deal with the damages done to the natural and human environment in Iraq. Countering totalitarian, unifying discourses of globalisation and nationalism, al-Nasiri creates subjective visual images. Through the particular time and space of Ibn Zaydun's Andalus, al-Nasiri transcends dichotomies of subject/object, time/space and object/word/image, insisting on the right for a coexistence of mutable human subjectivities, spaces and experiences, whereby even the myths and memories of Andalusian space and poetry undergo transformations, mutating, dislocating and displacing the experience of nostalgia and exile within and beyond the framework of Ibn Zaydun's 'qafiyā' poem.

Chinese aesthetics and metaphysics: transcending memories

The confluences of time/space, music/poetry and images/words, are used as a formalist technique to promote a planetary collectivity through difference, which could be

⁵⁰⁴ Hu Shi, 'Pragmatism', *Xin qingnian*, 6. 4 (1917), reprinted in *Hu Shi Wenji* [Essays by Hu Shi], ed. Ouyang Zhesheng (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 1988), 211-212, quoted from Minglu Gao, *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth Century Chinese Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2011), p. 3.

better understood in al-Nasiri's case by referring to Hsieh Ho's classical sixth century text, *Six Principles of Chinese Painting*⁵⁰⁵, as well as aiding the understanding of how al-Nasiri conflates binaries of globalisation and nationalism, both rooted in identity politics. It is necessary to do this in order to see how al-Nasiri functions in a wider Chinese tradition that engages with both Western and Chinese influences and sources.

According to Ho, the aspects of Chinese painting that must be observed in order of importance are: i. 'Spirit Resonance (or Vibration of Vitality) and Life Movement', ii. the manner which the brush is used and applied, iii. the accurate depiction of objects, iv. colour corresponding to the characteristics of the portrayed, v. the spatial composition of the work, and vi. the accurate reproduction of original master works.

For the remainder of this Chapter, I will make an analysis of the five 'Homage' paintings in light of the five latter aspects by Ho, locating in the process how al-Nasiri negotiates Chinese aesthetic principles in his representation of the memory of a period of 'high' Arab culture to resist the violence of war and outdated models of Iraqi art.

Brushstrokes

How the brush is used and applied is one important principle in Ho's canonised principles of painting. The brush is used and applied in two different ways here: i. Nasab pens the poetry of Ibn Zaydun, which is then printed onto the canvas by al-Nasiri, and ii. al-Nasiri applies brushstrokes onto the canvas after printing Nasab's

⁵⁰⁵ Susan Bush and Hsio-yen Shih, 'Pre-T'ang Interpretation and Criticism', in *Early Chinese Texts on Paintings* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), p. 40.

version of the ‘qafīyya’ to break free from the strict adherence to written text and cultural memory.

Thus, al-Nasiri’s use of the brush is not to create a signifying structure through linguistic signs, but through visual forms independent of thought paradigms. The brushstrokes presented here, which look like a ‘plus’ symbol, have no meaning embedded in language. The visual symbol does not dictate meaning or impose a selective signification onto the painting. Rather the brushstroke is an act representing the physical and spiritual mood of the artist, the expressive movement of his hand, not the expression of an ideology or historical memory. It is this second use of the brush by al-Nasiri that will be discussed in this section on the brushstroke.

I argue that what is seen on the canvas as brushstrokes, is a postmodern Chinese technique called ‘calligraphyism’⁵⁰⁶ where the character-like forms are completely removed from language-thought. This is one way in which the paintings challenge didactic readings of art, re-presenting cultural memory through destroying the text’s legibility and combining it with abstract forms.

By looking at how signs function in the paintings, we are able to deduce meaning from *within*; we can derive an epistemological understanding of how signs produce meaning and how we come to know meaning, thus elevating the painting-text as dynamic. What this particular approach fosters is a reading which steers away from ‘excessive realism, intentionalism, and nonreflexive projections of anachronistic preoccupations authorised as “historical”’,⁵⁰⁷.

This in turn can be expanded to relate to the wider discourses in which the text functions, rather than forces meaning onto the text externally without paying

⁵⁰⁶ Zhang, *Brushed Voices*, p. 56.

⁵⁰⁷ Mieke Bal, ‘Seeing Signs: The Use of Semiotics for the Understanding of Visual Art’, in *The Subjects of Art History: Historical Objects in Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. by Mark A. Cheetham, Michael Ann Holly, Keith Moxey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 74.

particular attention to the way meaning is produced internally. By creating visual symbols divorced from historical signs, which indicate plurality through the iconic resemblance to the 'plus' symbol, al-Nasiri violates the delineations of language-thought that are based in one historical moment and space which regurgitate cultural memories.

This disruption of linear and bordered concepts of time and space could be read through the prism of Chinese philosophy, where human ontology involves connected and planetary networks. The Daoist

sympathy was primordial identification, interfusion, and unification of subject and object, of one and many, of man and the universe. It was not a product of rational intellection, but an ontological experience.⁵⁰⁸

In the paintings below, subject and object are conflated; the calligraphic plus symbol with an additional stroke across the canvas is a single visual symbol which brings together the many times and spaces that are represented in the work. As al-Nasiri is referring to the historical moment of al-Andalus to imagine an alternative future for Iraq, it could be argued that the calligraphyism of the brushstrokes is an attempt to symbolically represent this conflation of multiple histories and geographies.⁵⁰⁹ This thus challenges the linear approach to history in Western philosophical thought: just like postmodern Chinese calligraphers have sought

⁵⁰⁸ Chung-yuan Chang, *Creativity and Taoism: A Study of Chinese Philosophy, Art and Poetry* (New York: Julian Press, 1963), p. 21.

⁵⁰⁹ On a study about space and calligraphy in the Chinese mosque built and used by the *Hui* minority, Sadiq Javer concludes that the use of Arabic and Chinese calligraphy, the decorative function of which 'helps to create a psychological space, a way of signalling the commonalities of culture and religion, the unity of the community, and the spirituality of the space', in 'Space and Calligraphy in the Chinese Mosque', in *Calligraphy and Architecture in the Muslim World*, p. 413. In the case of the *Hui* community, the mosque becomes a space to unite two identities: Chinese and Muslim. For al-Nasiri, using Chinese calligraphyism, with *thuluth* script in the form of the poem is not necessarily identitarian, but it's a more general effort to unite multiple geographies and histories.

powerful abstract forms to deny the meaning of characters, al-Nasiri is also projecting an alternative play on Chinese abstract brushstrokes to create a planetary conception of human and artistic networks of cultural exchange.

These new understandings of cultural flows could be understood by looking at how Chinese calligraphy has developed since the late twentieth century. Modern Chinese calligraphy still preserves the intrinsic structure of each character and remains an artistic form of writing. Calligraphyism however seeks to alter the basic structure of the characters themselves, even if they can no longer be read as writing, and as such [become] pure abstract art, examples of Chinese postmodernism.⁵¹⁰

It could be said that al-Nasiri is dismantling and recreating the poem in the same way that Chinese characters are dismantled. As such he adopts a Chinese planarity. In addition to this, there exists a spiritual element which is void in Western abstract art. 'Daoist calligraphic style is marked by a lack of affectation and a touch of mysticism.'⁵¹¹ Combining this mysticism, with non-meaning, we can say that a higher truth of being is being sought, unrestrained by verbal and linguistic determination. This contrasts with the language-determined meaning of Ibn Zaydun's poem. The calligraphyism of the brushstrokes is clearly visible, whereas language can sometimes be hidden and obscure as evidenced in Figure 3.3.2. As there is no direct relationship between the brushstrokes of calligraphyism and the poem, the purpose of using the brushstrokes may lie in Daoist philosophy as well as a technique inspired by Daqian.

⁵¹⁰ Zhang, *Brushed Voices*, p. 56.

⁵¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 90. Footed in Zhang Yigou, 'Wang Xuezhong De Yixiang Tongyi Guan', in *Wang Xuezhong Yishu Guoji Yantao Hui Lunwenji*, p. 158.

Lao Zi (ca. 571-471 B. C.) believed that ‘being (existence) derives from nonbeing (nonexistence).’⁵¹² In Daoist thought, nonbeing is the more truthful of the complementary pair because space is the basis of life, the root, without which nothing on earth would grow. Daqian, who used the Tang dynasty technique of ‘splashed ink’ creating semi-abstract compositions,⁵¹³ wanted to ‘revive the elite tradition of literati painting [...] and make it appealing to the modern audience’⁵¹⁴. Both these approaches, when used to understand al-Nasiri’s ‘Homage’ paintings, enable us to appreciate the ambivalence of the brushstroke.

In the arrangement of calligraphyism amidst the layered beauty of the Wallada-lute player and Ibn Zaydun’s lines of poetry, we could say that according to Daoist thought, a search for truth is being suggested through a chaotic interplay between abstract symbols (non-being) and the iconic-indexical poem (being). This nonbeing of Daoism, is actually at the heart of all paintings that play with abstract expressionism; it is essential because it is where freedom, divorced from limitations of thought, can be enjoyed and celebrated. In setting up an epistemological framework which portrays the overcoming of the breakdown of language systems, an alternative ontological construction can exist, where the self is completely liberated through new appropriations between the visual image and the written word.

In addition to referencing Arabic poetry, al-Nasiri employs Chinese calligraphyism and Daoist interpretations of art practices to create a harmonious fluidity. Through this polyphony of artistic influences, al-Nasiri resists ‘death and horror’ by creating a Third Space which reimagines ‘Iraqi identity’ as hybrid and

⁵¹² Footnoted in Zhang, *Brushed Voices* p. 20, see Patrick E. Moran, *Three Smaller Wisdom Books (Lao Zi’s Dao De Jing, the Great Learning [Da Xue], and Doctrine of the Mean [Zhong Yong])* (Lanham, Md., 1993), p. 87.

⁵¹³ Fu, *Challenging the Past*, p. 15.

⁵¹⁴ Fu, *Challenging the Past*, p. 16.

polyvocal. He uses an art form which is more spiritual through its ontological and epistemological underpinnings.

Through applying Chinese concepts of brushstrokes without meaning embedded in language, there is a sense that existence and being can be found in nonbeing, that where voices have been silenced, al-Nasiri can have these said voices be metaphorically represented. This is how al-Nasiri writes back to the metropolitan cultures: by creating links between Arab, Chinese and Western art. It is his way to ‘voyage in’⁵¹⁵, using his art to inform his audience of a more peaceful social and political landscape which promotes cohabitation between Iraq’s various sects and communities.

The Accurate Depiction of Objects: Obscuring the Lute Player

As I have argued throughout this thesis, there is a constant antagonism between the memories of historical realities and myths. In the series of paintings, which employ printing techniques, this historical accuracy is undermined by obscurity. In all the works, the figure of a lute player exists. This lute player is taken to create a symbolic relationship with Wallada, as it derives from a history book.⁵¹⁶

Although there is an iconic and exact copying of the image, it is covered in places with paint or text, or sometimes a combination of the two. The overlaying of the lute player’s face, used to symbolise Wallada, could also indicate the destruction

⁵¹⁵ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 261.

⁵¹⁶ This picture of the lute player – as is shown in Figures 3.3.1-3.3.5 – ‘is an old photo from one of the books on Islam in Andalusia which inspired [al-Nasiri] to suggest an image of Wallada’ (Email to the author 2 November 2011). Note that it is interesting how the image is representational, showing the indebtedness to Renaissance and Chinese traditions of verisimilitude, but is taken from an Arabic book.

of supposedly epitomical (female) beauty destroyed by human intervention, brutal war and savage pillage.

This seemingly contradictory stance only corroborates the ambiguity of the lute player in the paintings, vivid in some paintings and obscure in others, nothing appearing seems to save the lute. Such a cryptic approach to historical narratives is indicative of the nature of myths; they are fluid and can serve multiple purposes, or at times even no purpose, despite having the appearance of truth and iconic representation.

Analysing this response in the Barthesian sense, we can say that the myth of Wallada has an ideological function of naturalisation, which is to say that culture becomes naturalised, that the historical value of a golden image of al-Andalus - filled with beautiful princesses, pining poets, splendid architectural buildings, peaceful, cohabitative societies - becomes self-evident. To refute it would seem ludicrous.

The function of using the myth of Wallada as a real figure *as represented in historical sources* is to serve the ideological interest of al-Nasiri himself: primarily that once upon a time when al-Andalus and Baghdad were peaceful cities, in which people co-habitated⁵¹⁷.

Thus, although Wallada seems to be an innocent insertion here, which seems to serve as a visual clue to the object and subject of Ibn Zaydun's poem, in fact there is an ideological principle behind it. Using the myth in this way is to solidify aspects of culture as being 'natural' in order to make the hopes for a better, settled and

⁵¹⁷ Several critics and political commentators have noted the role of American media and officials in exaggerating sectarian violence in the early years of the 2003 Iraq War in order to justify American military presence. According to Richard Miller 'the growing carnage of sectarian violence became the dominant theme of American reporting from Iraq. The incidents were routinely framed with reports of opinions of American officials that the continued presence of U.S troops was a vital safeguard against further explosive expansion of this violence', in *Globalizing Justice: The Ethics of Poverty and Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

peaceful Iraq, more concrete. Wallada does not function within Nasiri's employment of her as an individual. Al-Nasiri is referring to the Ibn Zaydun construction of Wallada as a lover and object of desire in his poem, which I argue is a combination of various myths. In his paintings Baghdad also becomes that unreachable female figure that is to be desired.

'Baghdad', like 'Wallada', is a figure that does not exist in reality, but is nonetheless evoked through cultural memories and reconstructions of architectural sites in literary texts. Employing myth in this way enables al-Nasiri to visually illustrate the need for a more promising future to be projected onto the cultural scene. Images of Iraq have been covered in blood, especially those in the media. Al-Nasiri is trying to create an alternative image which is more positive and 'enlightened'.

But this enlightenment is ambiguous, like the figure of Wallada which is hazy and obscure. Similar to the way in which the poem by Ibn Zaydun makes Wallada's memory a real-life phenomenon through distance, time and memory, and through the evocations that the architectural grandeur of Madinat al-Zahra bring, the lute player figure is also alive and real; it exists and engages with the poem, through its musical reference, but also distantly, subjected by the control of the creator. Hence, Wallada cannot be fully seen. She is represented through metaphors, symbols and analogies. 'Her' vitality I argue is represented symbolically; through engagement with several layers of representation (iconically, symbolically and indexically), and as such an energetic, dynamic force is given to the work. The force apparent in the series is the aspect of movement: out of darkness there emerges a space filled with light.

The unification of Wallada with Madinat al-Zahra is another example of the Daoist sympathy which sees 'being' as essentially intertwined with the environment. She is both Wallada the subject of the poem, and the object of the poetic speaker's

desire. Illustrating this subjectification, the symbolic figure of Wallada, signified through the icon of the lute player, Wallada remains hidden. Even in Ibn Zaydun's poem, there is no mention of Wallada herself. So, the memories of Wallada have circulated as a result of literary criticism. Despite this subjectivity, Wallada is the source of beauty, and the 'high-culture' inspiration of canonical poetry and painting.

The Accurate Reproduction of Original Master Works: Between Loyalty to the Past and Freedom in the Future

There are two master works that al-Nasiri is redeploying. Firstly, there is Ibn Zaydun's poem, as it exists in the Arabic literary canon. Secondly, there is the written form of the poem as penned down by Nasab. In Chinese artistic traditions, an artist pays ultimate homage to his or her predecessor by copying his or her work, with the intention of keeping that work and the memory of its traditions alive.⁵¹⁸ Al-Nasiri has surely reproduced an inscription of Ibn Zaydun's poem in order to keep the spirit of the poem alive: the beauty of its description of nature, and the relationship one has with the built environment when remembering one's beloved.

But there is an additional element to the role of memory here, that pays homage to Ibn Zaydun: the metaphor that Wallada becomes, a metaphor for Baghdad, the fallen 'Golden City' that was once bright with illumination, the beauty of which is doomed to forgetfulness. Al-Nasiri's act of paying homage to Ibn Zaydun the Andalusí poet, is also an homage to beauty, a homage to 'Baghdad before the wars'.

⁵¹⁸ Ben-Ami Scharfstein, *Art Without Borders: A Philosophical Exploration of Art and Humanity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 295.

As al-Nasiri distorts and displaces the linearity of the poem, repeating lines, and reprinting them onto one another as Figure 3.3.5 demonstrates, it could be said that there is a complicated relationship with the Chinese painting principle of accurate replications of original masterworks, in a way not dissimilar to Daqian. Just as al-Nasiri plays with the memory of the poem, he is also reappropriating the canon of Chinese aesthetic principles within the scope and frame of his own work. Thus, although al-Nasiri questioned the traditions of Western forms, while challenging the paradigms of modern Arab painters of Iraq's twentieth century, he complicates his relationship with Chinese art history as well. Ho's insistence on accurate representation is disseminated in 'Homage to Ibn Zaydun' where he questions truth values and the possibility of ever being able to depict historical myths accurately.

From hereon, al-Nasiri is not in search of a single truth, but uses multiplicity to go beyond epistemological searching to a metaphysical drive yearning for an escape from the demands of human existentialism that is material in nature. It is a resistance to the colonisation by memory of creativity, through disrupting the memory of one of Arabic literatures most canonised poems and dismantling the word-image binary. Al-Nasiri's is indeed more concerned with a higher form of spiritual and metaphysical illumination, represented in the symbol of 'light'.

Yellow paint, Ishraq and Light

Light, signifying spiritual illumination, is a significant aspect to the poem which we cannot ignore, considering the several repetitions of the hemistich

فازدادَّ منه الصَّحَى في العينِ إشراقًا

*so increasing with their shining in the sun the brilliance*⁵¹⁹

found in Figures 3.2.1, 3.2.3 and 3.2.5. The hemistich is used where the poetic voice sees the rose beds brighter because of the sun's illuminating rays, making beauty visible. 'Ishraq' or brilliance therefore functions as the vehicle through which we see beauty, thus clarifying our vision and understanding of our natural world. 'Ishraq' which is a verbal noun meaning illumination or brilliance derived from the root 'sh-r-q'. 'Sharq' is also derived from this root word meaning east, as well as 'al-mashriq' which is also derived from this same root. The notion that the sun and hence light rises in the east can be deduced.

The word 'ishraq' also rhymes with 'Iraq', serving to link Eastern illumination and Iraq using text and phonetics to establish the connection. In fact, 'Iraq' rhymes with the whole rhyming scheme of the poem, including the third most repeated last line, the last word of which is 'ushshaq'.

What constitutes the East is not resolved in the paintings. They instead leave us with a planteray conception of peripheries, centres and borders. Ibn Zaydun's poem references 'al-sharq' from al-Andalus, also known as 'al-gharb al-islami', and as Lug states, 'the place [Madinat al-Zahra] is more its emotional perception in the mind of the poet than an actual locality'⁵²⁰, indicating that even Ibn Zaydun used a memory of Madinat to conjure the memory of Wallada.

Al-Nasiri on the other hand paints from 'al-sharq' with reference to Mesopotamia's West, al-Andalus, and the East's east (Chinese Daoism). Al-Nasiri

⁵¹⁹ Ibn Zaydun, in Lug, *Poetic Techniques*, p. 120, l. 6.

⁵²⁰ Lug, *Poetic Techniques*, p. 122.

could possibly be proposing a return to al-Andalus as an alternative west, through symbolically subverting Western cartography where Europe is the centre of the world, and the East includes the represented regions of China and the Arabic speaking world. In the paintings the ‘sharq’ is a) a remembered and imagined al-Andalus through cultural memory, and b) the lands of ‘al-mashriq al-‘Arabi’, including the Levant and Mesopotamia, and China.

By questioning cartographic representations of what constitutes the *sharq*, al-Nasiri is deconstructing Western-centred ways of perceiving the world: the way we come to define our position in the world, both geographically and ideologically. Seen in this respect, we can say that Eastern light enables us to see, thus framing the body of knowledge that we have acquired as individuals.⁵²¹ In creating intertextual visual paintings, the monolithic nature of cultural narratives is destabilised. Cultural memories are visually represented as being a planetary convolution of different art histories, which resist global and nationalist boundaries. Al-Nasiri represents these cultural memories by employing various aspects of Arabic, Chinese and Western forms to oppose singular notions of geographies and histories.

This opposition to singularity through the references to light are created by conflating Daoist and Sufi conceptualisations of light. For example, in Figure 3.3.4 the profusion of the colour yellow amidst darker tones confer a sense that Iraq can only find peace – symbolised by the word ‘ishraq’, meaning ‘radiance’, possibly referencing Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi’s neo Platonic school of Illuminism or ‘ishraq’⁵²², and the yellow paint used, with regions of plain emptiness and the image

⁵²¹ Higher knowledge and Truth that can only be achieved through establishing a connection between mind and soul, reaching a state of illumination is a notion coined in Suhrawardi’s *Hikmat al-ishraq*.

⁵²² There is a very interesting connection between the Islamic mystic and philosopher Shihab al-Din Yahya Suhrawardi’s notion that pure ‘Being and Knowledge is irradiations of the Pure Light which rises in the East’ and Chinese Daoist philosophy. For more on Illuminism, please see R. Arnaldez,

of a lute player, which goes hand in hand with the musical poetics of the ‘qafiyya’. The empty yellow spaces are highly emotional as they allow the individual artist to explore a different avenue of expression, unconfined by already existing textual and visual material. According to Scharfstein, in Daoist belief

the adept grows an embryo inside himself in order to rejuvenate or displace his aged self [...] the adept has to live morally and mediate on the Light of the One, that is, visualise a powerful succession of colours that will illuminate him internally.⁵²³

This could link with the idea of Yin and Yang: that there is conflict between the two, but that very conflict is necessary for existence, or co-existence of the two. For new art to be created, there is a conflict between new and old ‘rejuvenate[d] or displace[d]’ values and traditions. The creation of ‘Homage’ is a rejuvenation of the cultural memory of al-Andalus through Madinat al-Zahra in the poem, to imagine Baghdad’s present and future. This illumination, understood in the terms ‘Light of the One’, is what is central to Daoism, and also to the series studied. Daoism allows us to understand the reference to light, significant to al-Nasiri’s artistic oeuvre on the whole:

The value of *Tao* lies in its power to reconcile opposites on a higher level of consciousness. It is symbolically expressed as light in Taoism.⁵²⁴

Through an illumination of human existence as well as metaphysical existence, of reflections upon the beauty in the natural environment, the dichotomous binaries

‘Ishrak’, Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition. Brill Online, 2012. Reference. School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). 06 May 2012 <http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/ishrak-SIM_3624> and Mehdi Amin Razavi, *Suhrawardi and the School of Illumination* (London; New York: Routledge, 1997).

⁵²³ Scharfstein, *Art Without Borders*, p. 266.

⁵²⁴ Chang, *Creativity and Taoism*, p. 5.

created by identitarian politics of globalisation and nationalist politics are collapsed, inviting a more heterogeneous framework of perception of human collectivity.

Going back to al-Nasiri's statement that he is using his art to strengthen the Iraqi identity, we could make the inference that Iraqi identity is perceived as whole, with all the various sects and factions reconciled, which will enable peaceful coexistence, just as the mythical memory of Madinat al-Zahra of al-Andalus is recreated and recycled.

Spatial Composition: On Emptiness

In al-Nasiri's combination of memory and forgetfulness, between the authority of the canon and the freedom to resist the canon, the paintings are composed of zones of intense multilayering, as well as emptiness. This use of space shows a visual affiliation with the Chinese abstract impressionist artist Zao-Wou Ki (1921 – 2013), whom al-Nasiri was influenced by through various catalogues and books as shown above. Reading what Wou-Ki's search for expression consists of, there are thus similarities with al-Nasiri: it is not mountains that he sought to depict, but the soul of the mountain, its spirit, its form, its occupation of space within the larger natural landscape. There is no attempt to create solid forms in Wou-Ki's art:

[Wou-Ki] borrows aptly from the Sung and Yuan traditions, learning from their manner of expressing nature's flowing energies, the dimensionality of objects, and the folding of space.⁵²⁵

⁵²⁵ Christies, 'Zao Wou-ki Lot Notes' <<http://www.christies.com/lotfinder/paintings/zao-wou-ki-5265270-details.aspx#top>> [accessed 10 February 2014]. See also Jean Leymarie, *Zao Wou-ki*, trans. by Kenneth Lyons (New York: Rizzoli, 1978); Zao Wou-Ki, 'Dialogue: Zao Wou-Ki/ Sophie Join-Lambert', in *Zhiao* (Tours: Musée des Beaux-Arts, 1990), pp. 11-15; and Claude Roy, *Zao Wou-ki: les grands peintres* (Paris: Cercle d'Art, 1988).

Just like history and the memories of time, space in the art works is folding and multilayered. This becomes a potent source of energy in Wou-Ki's work which I believe has strongly influenced al-Nasiri. His works show forceful, passionate movement, expressed not in concrete form, but in resemblance of spirit through the use of space. Al-Nasiri similarly avoids the iconic representation of nature and instead opts for a topographical depiction of space through the feelings and sense of the space of Madinat al-Zahra as imagined from readings of Ibn Zaydun's poem.

The destruction of architectural grandeur, the pain of loss, the changes found in empty space in what was once a busy and dynamic environment, are all explored artistically, through obscuring the poem's legibility and creating zones of emptiness from the memory of an imagined space. All of these are elements to construct the sublime, 'which confound our abilities to synthesise them into knowledge'⁵²⁶. Just like in Wou-Ki's work, where emptiness actually symbolises the wind that blows around the cliffs and mountains, al-Nasiri also creates an open, inclusive space that allows for reflection and meditation on the poem inscribed.

This inclusive space allows for an alternative concept of landscape art by 'drawing with fire on a land rich with oil'⁵²⁷. The 'fire' could be symbolically evoked through the red paint used. But that fire also refers to death and tragedy, to human suffering. These catastrophic sets of circumstances are being used to 'draw' on a land not simply rich with oil, but also rich with culture. This critique could be used to understand al-Nasiri's paintings, shown in Figures 3.3.1 - 3.3.5: red used in the paintings could evoke 'fire' or indeed blood as later argued, and the black possibly

⁵²⁶ *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 'Jean-François Lyotard (1924—1998)' <<http://www.iep.utm.edu/lyotard/>> [accessed 10 March 2013].

⁵²⁷ Ibrahim Rashid, 'Game of Burning Stones: Between Establishment and Change', in *Strokes of Genius*, pp. 69.

might refer to the 'oil', something which has been the burden on Iraq's humanity⁵²⁸. Understanding the semiotic codes al-Nasiri's works enable an 'alternative concept of landscape art' to be constructed.

Arguing that al-Nasiri is constructing a non-Western visual series of landscape paintings, the landscape is evoked metaphorically, and goes beyond the realism of Western art. In a statement al-Nasiri relates the concern of homeland, love and beauty to poetry⁵²⁹. Nature to him is one proponent of beauty which he uses to make reference to time and place. Al-Nasiri's statement about his work, with its collapsing of opposing times, techniques, styles, colours, systems of representation and places, can be related to the concept of Third Space⁵³⁰. It is proposed here that in doing so al-Nasiri is envisioning an alternative social and political landscape of Iraq, as a tool of resistance against totalitarian states and cultural discourse's manipulation of cultural memories.

⁵²⁸ For more on Iraq and the issue of oil in conflict, see Steven Hurst, *United States and Iraq Since 1979: Hegemony, Oil and War* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009); William R. Clark, *Petrodollar Warfare: Oil, Iraq and the Future of the Dollar* (Gabriola, B.C.: New Society Publishers, 2005); and Oystein Noreng, *Crude Power: Politics and the Oil Market* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007).

⁵²⁹ Rafa al-Nasiri, *Beyond Time*, (Amman: Nabad Gallery Publication, September, 2010) <http://www.rafaNasiri.com/0images-pdf/beyond_time.pdf> [accessed 10 November 2011].

⁵³⁰ Homi Bhabha talks of understanding what Third Space means for understanding the production of meaning in cultural difference. Third Space 'problematizes the binary division of past and present, tradition and modernity'. He continues 'It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew. [...] By exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves.' For more see Homi Bhabha, 'The Commitment to Theory', in *The Location of Culture* (London; New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 19-39.



Figure 3.3.1

Rafa al-Nasiri

Untitled

Homage to Ibn Zaydun series

2010

200cm x 200cm

Oil on canvas

Courtesy of artist and Meem Gallery, Dubai



Figure 3.3.2

Rafa' al-Nasiri

Untitled

Homage to Ibn Zaydun series

2010

200cm x 200cm

Oil on canvas

Courtesy of artist and Meem Gallery, Dubai



Figure 3.3.3

Rafa' al-Nasiri

Untitled

Homage to Ibn Zaydun series

2010

200cm x 200cm

Oil on canvas

Courtesy of artist and Meem Gallery, Dubai



Figure 3.3.4

Rafa' al-Nasiri

Untitled

Homage to Ibn Zaydun series

2010

200cm by 200cm

Oil on canvas

Courtesy of artist and Meem Gallery, Dubai



Figure 3.3.5

Rafa' al-Nasiri
Untitled
 Homage to Ibn Zaydun series
 2010
 200cm by 200cm
 Oil on canvas
 Courtesy of artist and Meem Gallery, Dubai

Summary

Al-Nasiri's relationship with singular projections of identity, inherent to nationalism, is made apparent through his references to multiple geographies and histories. Just as the relationships between states are no longer based only on notions of national sovereignty, but rather on interconnected networks of continuous and

porous circulations, so has the visual art analysed in this Chapter demonstrated a planetary perspective of visual culture and human experiences.

Al-Nasiri's art engages in planetary understandings of collective experiences without reducing objects, words or images to signs in an identitarian system. Such models of established literary and artistic traditions informing our understandings of word, image and object are transgressed through questioning human relationships with the natural environment, which are fashioned by constructed, selected and recycled memories of Arab and Chinese high culture, symbolised through using 'texts' and techniques from Abbasid, Andalusí and modern Chinese art and literary practices.

In using elements from different cultural traditions, al-Nasiri has exhibited a tenacity to creatively fashion a new, pluralistic and planetary vision for Iraqi society and artistic practices. In doing so, the art works deeply engage with planetary notions of human collective experiences and histories, whilst resisting the global order of power and cultural politics (both depending on finite and bound constructs of identity).

Through a combination of using al-Wasiti's model to create his own masterpiece of Ibn Zaydun's canonical Arabic poem (which was used to recycle memories of Madinat al-Zahra and al-Andalus' 'Golden Age') and Daqian's recreation of lost and destroyed paintings and splashed ink technique, al-Nasiri has constructed a unique poetic to resist the hegemony of national and global politics.

This opposition through poetics has at its centre a multi-layered engagement with memory games, using material objects of books and prints, words and images to develop and help circulate new memories and alternative legacies. This poetics has served to visualise a strengthening social solidarity through inclusion and pluralism.

Conclusion

Visual artists and writers from Iraq and Palestine during the turn of the twenty-first century are challenging the modes of their own disciplines, using objects, words and images as sites of resistance to memories of singular notions of human experiences and realities, as mediated through nationalist and global political canons.

This thesis is about what the various hegemonies artists and writers from Iraq and Palestine resist in their creative works. These hegemonies which are prescribed by the circulation of – scriptural and visual, medieval and modern – memories. For the artists and writers presented here these memories, both individual and collective – form on the one hand a burden to their individual expression, and on the other hand form tools to assert political and moral claims.

This thesis has set out to analyse what poetics, or formalist strategies, these works have employed to resist hegemony in their employment of objects, words and images, transgressing the boundaries of the visual arts and literatures of Iraq and Palestine, at the turn of the twenty-first century.

This comparative approach to the role of memories in resistance, theorises a prolific cultural phenomenon of border-crossing in different creative mediums which has yet to be analysed in academic disciplines beyond geo- and identity politics.

Perhaps it is as a result of this gap that I have had to focus on a small selection of artists and writers who, from their position of exile, choose to use aesthetics that refuse anchoring in one particular heritage. In this thesis the resulting ‘planetary’ has not been analysed via their personal biographies, but through the aesthetics of their works, which has enabled richer extractions of the poetics of resistance. For example, in the analysis of al-Nasiri’s paintings, I have chosen to analyse the artistic and

spiritual influences from China, rather than relegate al-Nasiri's cultural and aesthetic experiences to description of elements of his works.

This urge for a reassessment of cultural flows takes into consideration the efforts of cultural producers who, in a similar way to Darwish, have been striving for aesthetic preoccupation beyond the narrow confines of nationalist and global politics. All these writers and artists shows new ways of thinking about cultural production beyond constructs of 'imagined totalities', which have remembered, appropriated and recycled cultural practices from the past. Thus, even where both the global literary and visual marketplaces celebrate and market the foreignness of postcolonial writers and artists, the cultural producers studied here themselves are refusing to associate their works with one definite location in an 'imagined totality'.

In this way, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Zygmunt Bauman's ideas have made significant contributions to my enagements with the visual arts and literatures shown here outside the frame of identity politics. Spivak and Bauman have both led us to consider that objects, words and images may be the sites to resist the production and sharing of impersonal and binary constructs of human experiences. Additionally, they have both presented interesting ways to think about the visual arts and literatures of Iraq and Palestine in the context of circulating networks of peoples and cultures.

Summary of findings

In answer to the question about what various hegemonies artists and writers from Iraq and Palestine resist in their creative works, it has become apparent from each chapter's analysis that authority is not only political, but is also aesthetic.

Khedairi's narrative *Absent* displays a resistance to the nationalist political hegemony and the authority of patriarchal figures within modern Iraqi art establishments. For Darwish, the manipulation of his poetry by the PLO to participate in a national canon, despite the lack of a recognised nation-state, frightened him so much that in his later work he created a poetic which avoided using words and symbols corresponding to binary constructs of national identity. Sabella's art participates in the resistance to nationalist and ideological hegemonies in having his images bear an uncanny relationship with words. In the last Chapter, the paintings by al-Nasiri demonstrate a reworking of the myths and memories created by Arabic literary canon, and a defiance of global art practices that seek to position him within a specific or particular cultural location, designated by Western categorisations of Iraq art based on the sectarian divides of contemporary Iraq.

The various hegemonies at play in Iraq and Palestine are prescribed by the circulation of – scriptural and Arab, medieval and modern – memories, to include: memories of biblical Palestine; memories of Abbasid Baghdad as a centre of knowledge and creativity; memories of al-Andalus as a symbol of the 'Golden Age' of Arabic culture; and memories of a strong, nationalist and patriarchal state.

These memories, both individual and collective, have become at once a burden and the seed of an assertion of political and moral claims. For al-Nasiri, the memory of al-Andalus, frail as it is, invigorates imaginings of a more peaceful contemporary Iraq. For Khedairi, Sabella and Darwish however, these memories exerted tremendous pressure on their right to frivolity. A combination of these memories circulate, reshuffle and re-present the legacies of cultural symbols constructed in order to create boundaries of thought, physical inhibition, colonisation of the imagination and parameters on creative expression. These contested traditions are framed within new

discourses of global politics⁵³¹ and older national priorities to dismantle conceptions of the homeland as definite and closed.⁵³²

In reshaping, restructuring and sometimes abandoning old memories the cultural producers here make powerful projections of the future⁵³³ which offer a more inclusive and planetary vision of histories and geographies. Such an approach can only take place from the perspective of exile, which all the writers and artists are working from; it is from exile that the power of nostalgia for a reborn lost paradise is more forceful, because in exile there is a spatial and temporal shift which thus allows for shifts in paradigms of cultural and literary traditions; linear and rigid notions of historicity and geography; and memories. From exile 'seeing "the entire world as a foreign land"' enables originality [and plurality] of vision'⁵³⁴. Hence the artists and writers discussed here are no longer interested in using propaganda, or even subverting institutional usage of cultural symbols, but instead have the freedom to transgress all boundaries and pioneer combinations of memories and symbolic codes.

⁵³¹ *Gramsci and Global Politics: Hegemony and Resistance*, ed. by Mark McNally and John Schwartzmantel (London: Routledge, 2009). I take global politics to mean include the rise of neoliberal secular ideals that have allowed the proliferation and growth of multinational global corporations that support and fund these ideals, that promote global homogeneity, that manipulate such notions in order to control the economics and geopolitics of vast areas of the world through trade and commerce⁵³¹; it further includes the global politics of the visual art and literary markets which endorses cultural productions that prize and celebrate Western cultural influences. For more on these ideas, see Schwartzmantel, 'Introduction', p. 7 who argues that global politics endorses 'a form of neoliberalism, in which market relations are the paradigm of all social relations, has been imposed on all actors (state and non-state) in the world system. Such a way of life is policed through a network of rules and institutions exemplified by such organizations as the World Trade Organization (WTO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank.' For more on the cultural politics of the Nobel Prize, please see Julia Lovell, *Politics of Cultural Capital: China's Quest for a Nobel Prize in Literature* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006).

⁵³² Philipsen, 'Introduction', *Globalizing Contemporary Art*, p. 9.

⁵³³ Of this Dariwish states 'all poetry is ... concerned with writing the future', quoted in Najat Rahman, 'Afterword: When the Poet Becomes an Endless Poem', in *In the Wake of the Poetic*, p. 131, from Interview with Randa Abou-Bakr, in Randa Abou-Bakr, *The Conflict of Voices in the Poetry of Dennis Butrus and Mahmoud Darwish* (Berlin: Reichert, 2004), p. 206.

⁵³⁴ Edward W. Said, 'Reflections on Exile', in *Reflections in Exile & Other Literary and Cultural Essay* (London: Granta Publications, 2000), p. 182. Darwish also makes a similar point in 'A Love Story Between an Arab Poet and His Land. An Interview With Mahmud Darwish', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 31.3 (2002), p. 67.

To resist nationalist and global pressures which manipulate these memories, poetics or formalist strategies have been employed in the complex interweaving between objects, words and images. Objects, words and images have been taken out of their historically-conditioned contexts, with ruptures created between their signifieds and signifiers. In this respect, objects which have previously not been included in the national art canon are given priority in the novel; old metaphors are replaced with words divorced from their historical significations; and images are either made obscure or bear a complex relationship with their historically-associated words, displaying multidimensional contacts with other mediums of creative articulations.

It has become evident how these various forms interact to create meaning and empower the very act of creating art through multidimensional synergies between the material object, the written word and the visual image. This accumulated cultural trafficking transcends divided notions of history and geography as I have discussed using Sarah Brouillette's *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace*, producing meaning through i. crossing their own cultural legacies, histories and memories, and ii. resisting the global culture industry celebration of repressing 'other' regions, to engage in nuanced transcultural and intercultural creative expressions.

In employing these poetics, the visual arts and literatures of Iraq and Palestine at the turn of the twenty-first century have displayed a transgression of identitarian boundaries, fixed in place by the recycling and reshuffling of memories. It has become evident that the literatures and visual arts of Iraq and Palestine are concerned with establishments other than their immediate political one. Nationalism might have left its legacy, and globalisation has changed how people view images, and how art and literature are created and circulated. These two systems together might have

created a demand for regurgitations of identity and cultural binaries. And yet these artists and writers have resisted those binaries in a search for a collectivity that does not jeopardise individual autonomy and freedom to contemplate the self, beauty and nature.

Through this discussion, it has become apparent that many similarities exist between the approaches of Iraqi and Palestinian writers, due their histories of British colonialism. However, the individual experiences of their histories and geographies are markedly different from what the collective identities they are part of, would prescribe.

What has become apparent, as a result of Palestine's lack of government, and Iraq's weak government, is a literary and visual art practice which still struggles to assert its existence and right to independence. As Darwish so elegantly put it,

Writing poetry requires a margin, a siesta [...] to be under occupation [...] is not a good inspiration for poetry. Still I can't choose my reality. And this is the whole question of Palestinian literature [and here I add culture], that we can't free ourselves of the historical moment.⁵³⁵

Study conclusions

Each artist and writer presented here offers a different perspective and way of understanding verbal words, verbal forms such as poetry and the novel, visual art forms, such as painting and photography, and objects. They all share a political vision

⁵³⁵ Darwish, 'A Love Story Between an Arab Poet and His Land', p. 67.

of resistance and offer new and fresh modes of thinking about human creativity, potential and understanding.

They present interesting ways to understand human behaviour, conflict resolution, peace-building, their respective societies, as well as their tenacious artistic and literary eloquence in speaking truth to power. Their works share not only a tone of resilient resistance against authoritative power structures, but also resist the ideological and epistemological circulation of memories that are created through semiotic systems.

The four chapters presented here have displayed, through the power of the visual arts and literatures, a tenuous resistance to global chaos that paradoxically produces the 'narrowing of identity and social solidarity' inherent in the Iraqi and Palestinian visual arts and literatures discussed.

Each visual artist and writer is working towards opening up the possibilities of identifying the collective and individual against patriarchal hegemony; traditional artistic values rooted in ancient heritage and colonial paradigms; corporate and state sponsored narratives of the collective national identity; political manipulation of literary canons; and the pressure to commit to exclusive narratives of the nation through the repetition of circulating symbols and religious texts.

In effect, this thesis has been marked by the call apparent in the visual arts and literatures studied, for the right to positive, open, plural and inclusive representations of objects relating i. to the individual, ii. to the visual image that explores personal and political issues, and iii. to the disruption of image and word oppositions to represent the projection for a future based on a multitude of gender, class, ethnic and semiological identities and structures. This can only be done through a reevaluation of the role of memory in all these identities and structures.

Limitations

Despite my own efforts to read original material in their own languages (including to read parts of Pamuk's primary texts in Turkish), my reading of secondary literature, especially in the field of visual arts is still conditioned by the unfortunate proliferation of more accessible Anglophone, and to a lesser degree Arabophone commercial writings. My linguistic limitations for example mean that I have not been able to access writings about Chinese art in Mandarin, which undoubtedly would have allowed for a richer understanding of al-Nasiri's paintings and its relation to Chinese art.

Other than linguistic barriers which I faced, there was the additional problem of engaging with Sabella's installation 'Settlement' through images. As this was a work commissioned by Mathaf: Museum of Modern Arab Art, Doha, it remains in the Museum's storage and has not been part of a publically accessible installation since its first appearance at Mathaf's inaugural exhibition *Sajjil* (30 December 2010 - 1 October 2011).

Sadly, during my 2012 interview with al-Nasiri in Amman, it was not possible to visit his studio to see him at work and learn more about his technique. Since his passing away, I therefore have had to rely on discussions with his wife May Muzaffar and his assistant Saver Jalal.

Future directions

Such limitations however leave scope for the future. Although my focus has been the works of specific artists and writers from Iraq and Palestine, it is evident that there is scope for this to be broadened. It could be implied for example that it would be interesting to extend my approach to other geographical regions in the Middle East.

In light of al-Nasiri's influence by Chinese art for example, it would be hugely beneficial for the history of Arab art to look at other Arab artists who were engaging with non-Western art paradigms, such as the ones in China, but also with those of Soviet Russia. In a future revision of this thesis, I would personally like to expand on the al-Nasiri Chapter and delegate more effort to understanding the specifically Chinese aesthetics and Chinese engagement with Western art forms during the mid-twentieth century. Moreover, more work could be done on calligraphy not just in visual Iraqi art, but also calligraphy in the novel.⁵³⁶

Concretely, Part I can be expanded to look at additional novels of Iraq and Turkey which use the theme of art and the museum. More research could be done on al-Rikabi's *Sabi' Ayyam al-Khalq*, which I briefly touched upon. Interestingly, a few weeks after completing Sabahattin Ali's *Kürk Mantolu Madonna*⁵³⁷ I discovered Maureen Freely's translation of it⁵³⁸. This is a wonderful novel of a young Turkish man who falls in love with a painter/ performing artist in Berlin. It is an earlier example of the Turkish novel toying with visual and performing art.

⁵³⁶ I recently read Rafik Schami, *The Calligrapher's Secret*, trans. by Anthea Bell (London: Arabia, 2010), which presents an interesting case study for the relationship between the novel and calligraphy, giving a very complex representation of Syrian society.

⁵³⁷ Sabahattin Ali, *Kürk Mantolu Madonna* (Istanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2009).

⁵³⁸ Sabahattin Ali, *Madonna in a Fur Coat*, trans. by Maureen Freely (London: Penguin, 2016).

Additionally Part II can be elaborated upon to look at non-canonical Palestinian literatures⁵³⁹ and their resistance to memory games through objects, word and images.

Lastly, as I selected the works based on their multidisciplinary approach, rather than the identity of their creators, only one cultural production was by a women, as such. In this light, this thesis could benefit greatly from more studies in these fields by women.

⁵³⁹ Atef Alshaer has recently published *Poetry and Politics in the Modern Arab World* (London: Hurst & Company, 2014) which looks at less widely circulated Palestinian and other Arab poets.

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List of images

Figure 1.1

Case 19. Belkıs'ın Hikayesi

Masumiyet Müzesi

Photograph taken by author with kind permission from Orhan Pamuk

Figure 2.1

Steve Sabella

Untitled

'Search' series

1997

13 x 20.5 cm

Black and white infrared photograph

Figure 2.2

Steve Sabella

Untitled

'Search' series

1997

13 x 20.5 cm

Black and white infra red photograph

Figure 2.3

Untitled

Steve Sabella

'Identity' series

2002

70 x 50 cm

Colour transparency

Figure 2.4

Steve Sabella

Untitled

'Identity' series

2002

70 x 50 cm

Colour transparency

Figure 2.5

Installation Shot at Mathaf Museum, Qatar

Steve Sabella

Settlement: Six Israelis and One Palestinian

2008–2010

Mathaf, Museum of Modern Arab Art, Doha

230cm x 164 cm

Lightjet print on 5cm aluminum box edge

This work has been commissioned for the 2010-11 Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha, Qatar as part of the exhibition *Told / Untold / Retold* curated by Sam Bardaouil & Till Fellrath

Figure 2.6

Portrait of one of the six Israelis

Steve Sabella

Settlement: Six Israelis and One Palestinian

2008-2010

Mathaf, Museum of Modern Arab Art, Doha

230cm x 164 cm

Lightjet print on 5cm aluminum box edge

This work has been commissioned for the 2010-11 Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha, Qatar as part of the exhibition *Told / Untold / Retold* curated by Sam Bardaouil & Till Fellrath

Figure 2.7

Detail - Portrait of the Palestinian

Steve Sabella

Settlement: Six Israelis and One Palestinian

2008-2010

Mathaf, Museum of Modern Arab Art, Doha

230cm x 164 cm

Lightjet print on 5cm aluminum box edge

This work has been commissioned for the 2010-11 Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha, Qatar as part of the exhibition *Told / Untold / Retold* curated by Sam Bardaouil & Till Fellrath

Figure 3.1.1

Rafaal-Nasiri

Untitled

1957

Courtesy of Rafa al-Nasiri

Figure 3.1.2

Rafa al-Nasiri

Untitled

1979

Courtesy of Rafa al-Nasiri

Figure 3.1.3

Rafa al-Nasiri

Untitled

1992

Courtesy of Rafa al-Nasiri

Figure 3.2.1

Rif'at al-Chadirchi, Jawad Selim and Muhammad Ghani Hikmet

Nasb al-Huriyya

1963

Medium

5000 cm x 800cm

Baghdad, Iraq

Figure 3.2.2

Hafed al-Druby

Suq Baghdad

1973

85cm x 65cm

Baghdad, Iraq

Oil on canvas

Courtesy of Mina al-Druby

Figure 3.2.3

Alharith joins a caravan to Mecca and meets Abu Zayd along the way, fols 94v-95r
from the Maqamat of al-Hariri,

Written and illustrated by Yahya al-Wasiti

Baghdad, Iraq, 634 AH/ AD 1237

Opaque watercolour, ink and gold on paper

39 x 34 x 5.5 cm

Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris

Courtesy of the British Museum

Figure 3.3.1

Rafa al-Nasiri

Untitled

Homage to Ibn Zaydun series

2010

200cm x 200cm

Oil on canvas

Courtesy of artist and Meem Gallery, Dubai

Figure 3.3.2

Rafa al-Nasiri
Untitled
 Homage to Ibn Zaydun series
 2010
 200cm x 200cm
 Oil on canvas
 Courtesy of artist and Meem Gallery, Dubai

Figure 3.3.3

Rafa al-Nasiri
Untitled
 Homage to Ibn Zaydun series
 2010
 200cm x 200cm
 Oil on canvas
 Courtesy of artist and Meem Gallery, Dubai

Figure 3.3.4

Rafa al-Nasiri
Untitled
 Homage to Ibn Zaydun series
 2010
 200cm x 200cm
 Oil on canvas
 Courtesy of artist and Meem Gallery, Dubai

Figure 3.3.5

Rafa al-Nasiri
Untitled
 Homage to Ibn Zaydun series
 2010
 200cm x 200cm
 Oil on canvas
 Courtesy of artist and Meem Gallery, Dubai

Appendix 1.0

From Orhan Pamuk, 'A Modest Manifesto for Museums' <<http://en.masumiyetmuzesi.org/page/a-modest-manifesto-for-museums>> [8 May 2016].

I love museums and I am not alone in finding that they make me happier with each passing day. I take museums very seriously, and that sometimes leads me to angry, forceful thoughts. But I do not have it in me to speak about museums with anger. In my childhood there were very few museums in Istanbul. Most of these were historical monuments or, quite rare outside the Western world, they were places with an air of a government office about them. Later, the small museums in the backstreets of European cities led me to realise that museums—just like novels—can also speak for individuals. That is not to understate the importance of the Louvre, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Topkapı Palace, the British Museum, the Prado, the Vatican Museums—all veritable treasures of humankind. But I am against these precious monumental institutions being used as blueprints for future museums. Museums should explore and uncover the universe and humanity of the new and modern man emerging from increasingly wealthy non-Western nations. The aim of big, state-sponsored museums, on the other hand, is to represent the state. This is neither a good nor an innocent objective.

1. Large national museums such as the Louvre and the Hermitage took shape and turned into essential tourist destinations alongside the opening of royal and imperial palaces to the public. These institutions, now national symbols, present the story of the nation—history, in a word—as being far more important than the stories of individuals. This is unfortunate because the stories of individuals are much better suited to displaying the depths of our humanity.

2. We can see that the transitions from palaces to national museums and from epics to novels are parallel processes. Epics are like palaces and speak of the heroic exploits of the old kings who lived in them. National museums, then, should be like novels; but they are not.

3. We don't need more museums that try to construct the historical narratives of a society, community, team, nation, state, tribe, company, or species. We all know that the ordinary, everyday stories of individuals are richer, more humane, and much more joyful.

4. Demonstrating the wealth of Chinese, Indian, Mexican, Iranian, or Turkish history and culture is not an issue—it must be done, of course, but it is not difficult to do. The real challenge is to use museums to tell, with the same brilliance, depth, and power, the stories of the individual human beings living in these countries.

5. The measure of a museum's success should not be its ability to represent a state, a nation or company, or a particular history. It should be its capacity to reveal the humanity of individuals.

6. It is imperative that museums become smaller, more individualistic, and cheaper. This is the only way that they will ever tell stories on a human scale. Big museums

with their wide doors call upon us to forget our humanity and embrace the state and its human masses. This is why millions outside the Western world are afraid of going to museums.

7. The aim of present and future museums must not be to represent the state, but to re-create the world of single human beings—the same human beings who have labored under ruthless oppression for hundreds of years.

8. The resources that are channeled into monumental, symbolic museums should be diverted to smaller museums that tell the stories of individuals. These resources should also be used to encourage and support people in turning their own small homes and stories into “exhibition” spaces.

9. If objects are not uprooted from their environs and their streets, but are situated with care and ingenuity in their natural homes, they will already portray their own stories.

10. Monumental buildings that dominate neighborhoods and entire cities do not bring out our humanity; on the contrary, they quash it. Instead, we need modest museums that honor the neighborhoods and streets and the homes and shops nearby, and turn them into elements of their exhibitions.

11. The future of museums is inside our own homes.

The picture is, in fact, very simple;

WE HAD

WE NEED

EPICS

NOVELS

REPRESENTATION

EXPRESSION

MONUMENTS

HOMES

HISTORIES

STORIES

NATIONS

PERSONS

GROUPS AND TEAMS

INDIVIDUALS

LARGE AND EXPENSIVE

SMALL AND CHEAP

Appendix 2.0

Mahmoud Darwish

Darwish was born in 1941, in Birweh. His family fled Palestine (1948), settling first in Lebanon (1948-1949). He left Palestine (1970 - 1971) to Moscow, studying political economy, but left to join the newspaper *al-Ahram* in Cairo (1971 - 1973). After joining the Palestinian Liberation Organisation in 1973 he was banned from reentering Israel, which lasted for 26 years. He lived in Beirut (1973 - 1982), founding the Lebanese *Al-Karmel*. This period of his poetic career was directly political. Fleeing after the PLO were expelled following the invasion by Ariel Sharon, he left to Tunisia, then to Cyprus and later travelling between Paris and Tunisia (1985 – 1995). After the Israel ban on his travel to Palestine was lifted, he settled in Amman, Jordan (1995 – 2008), frequently travelling to Ramallah.⁵⁴⁰

⁵⁴⁰ Khaled Mattawa, 'The Poet and the National Literature', in *Mahmoud Darwish: The Poet's Art and His Nation* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2014), pp. 14-6; Munir Akash and Carolyn Forché, 'Introduction', in Mahmoud Darwish, *Unfortunately, It Was Paradise: Selected Poems*, ed. and trans. by Munir Akash, Carolyn Forché, Sinan Antoon, Amira El-Zein and Fady Joudah (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), pp. xvi-xvii; and Ibrahim Muhawi, 'Introduction', in Mahmoud Darwish, *Memory for Forgetfulness August, Beirut, 1982*, trans. by Ibrahim Muhawi (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2013), pp. xxii-xxiv.

Appendix 3.0

Steve Sabella

Five years after he produced *Search*, *Identity* was created, a series of colour photographs. In 2003 he produced *End of days*. In 2004 he created the series *Till the End – Spirit of the Place*, in 2005 *Kan ya makan*, in 2006 *Exit*, in 2007 *Metalopia*, between 2008 and 2009, he produced *In Exile*, *Cecile Elisa Sabella* (named after his then seven-year-old daughter) and *Settlement – Six Israelis and One Palestinian*. In 2010, Sabella completed the works *Euphoria*, *In Transition*, *38 Days of Re-Collection*. In 2011, in the light of the Arab Spring, he created *Beyond Euphoria*. In 2012, Sabella planned three projects: 1) *Disturbia*, a collection of photo collage artworks; 2) a collaboration project with artist Jeanno Gaussi (a Berlin-based artist who originally comes from Kabul); through charged, ambivalent and aesthetic 'material' the work 'celebrates' transcendence from the 'state of exile' and creates unexpected connections, comparing peripheries and thus creating alternative centres; and 3) at the end of summer 2009, Sabella decided to go back to Jerusalem after a two year absence living in London. Looking for a place to stay in Jerusalem, he ended up renting (from an Israeli family) for 38 days one of the Palestinian homes occupied by Israel in 1948. At the same time, his house in London was sublet to an Israeli family from Jerusalem. It was inevitable that Sabella created an artwork about this charged and unexpected turn of events. After more than two years of reflection, Sabella decided to tackle this dilemma visually. This series was completed in 2014.⁵⁴¹

⁵⁴¹ For more on 38 Days, please see Wafa Gabsi, 'Image as Witness – Archeology of the Past: Interview with Steve Sabella', *Contemporary Practices: Visual Arts from the Middle East*, 14 (2014), pp. 66-9.

Sabella's project *Jerusalem in Exile – Tangible Memories (JIE)* argues that not only human beings are forced to live in exile, but cities can also live in forced irrevocable exile. Consequently, the notion that we all belong to a certain space is shattered. For Sabella, this also explained his state of mind of feeling out of place in his city of birth Jerusalem. According to him, all those who live in exiled cities are living in exile. *JIE* also explored the mental images of Palestinian exiles. Originally the project intended to transform these mental images to photographic ones. In 2007, a documentary film explored *JIE*, and in one part of the film Sabella speaks in front of an occupied Palestinian home from 1948 in the former Arab neighborhood Talbiya in Jerusalem. He expressed that if he would manage to enter one of the occupied Palestinian homes and create the mental images from within the space, the produced image would be more authentic, coded and charged.

Entering the house with discomfort and unease, the suspicious landlord of Sabella's origin form the new artwork which Sabella has as a working title of *38 days of Re-Collection*. Similar to the style of Sabella's art, this artwork might come across as aesthetically pleasing, yet, it is through this attraction that Sabella manages to entice spectators to explore deeper meanings of origins, memory and exile.

Appendix 3.1

Palestine in Early Photography

The first photographic process, named the Daguerreotype after its inventor Louis-Jacques-Mande Daguerre, was introduced to the world in 1839. A vehicle through which modernity was recorded, the Daguerreotype soon after was known as a camera, as it was filled with light sensitive material to take photographs. Used by scientists to document specimens and also by Europe's aristocracy to document family portraits, the camera soon started selling on a mass scale. In the very same year of 1839, Horace Vernet and Frederic Goupil-Fesquet travelled to Palestine to photograph it. It was used as a visual aide for Orientalist travellers, missionaries and merchants as a way to record their discoveries.⁵⁴²

European and Orientalist interest in Palestine was spurred on by Palestine's religious significance for Christians, Muslims and Jews. In the Christian imagination, 'all roads lead to Jerusalem', which was both a metaphorical indication of Palestine's significance, but also a representation of contemporary cartography. Between 1800 and 1878 over two thousand books were published on Palestine in Europe and

⁵⁴² This is also true for the practice of photography in other contexts such as Egypt, China, India and many other countries. For more on photography as a form of documentation and as a form of art in helping to shape Egypt's social and political history see Maria Golia, *Photography and Egypt* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010). Jane Lydon, "Behold the Tears': Photography as Colonial Witness", *History of Photography*, 34.3 (2010), pp. 234-50 investigates photographs of Aboriginal imprisonment during the former years of the twentieth century, their role in shaping collective memory and how they have functioned symbolically in books, films, art and political campaigns. *The Marshall Albums: Photography and Archaeology*, ed. by Sudeshna Guha (London; New Delhi: Collection of Photography in association with Mapin Publishing, 2010) is a detailed volume with explores the photographic albums of Sir John Marshall, Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India (1902-1928), studying the trajectory of interest in Indian antiquities, the emergence of scientific scholarly archaeology in India and the necessary associations of colonial power. Darren Newbury, *Defiant Images: Photography and Apartheid in South Africa* (Pretoria: UNISA Press, 2009) looks at the way in which apartheid had an affect on the practice of photography. Another account of the history of Palestinian photography is Khalidi, *Before Their Diaspora*. Issam Nassar also studies the image of the Jerusalem city-scape in the early photography of Palestine in Nassar, *Photographing Jerusalem*, pp. 25-30.

America, as well as European travellers and expeditions in the 'Holy Land' documenting their experiences with the land. This interest grew with Orientalist scholarship – 'colonial and scientific interest in the region, the romantic passion for exotic sites, and a revived Christian interest in biblical studies and archaeology.'⁵⁴³ Unlike other technology brought on by modernisation such as the telegraph, the railway, the automobile and the airplane which also altered the way people related to time and space, photography's documentative abilities also has a profound effect on the epistemological organisations and modes of formulating the past and present. Used by Europeans as a way of discursively fixing their gaze on the 'Holy Land', the photograph would later be appropriated by Palestinian local photographers as a way of projecting an image to be part of Palestinian collective memory.⁵⁴⁴

Although many Palestinians, or local Palestinians whether from the Arab Muslim community, the Armenian community, the local Jewish *Yishuv* community or the Arab Christian community, found it difficult to note the biblical importance of the biblical sites in Palestine, and their work has still been shadowed by that of the Zionist Jewish photographers and the European Orientalist travellers, scientists and archaeologists, there remained some early attempts to document the people of the land, rather than simply reproduce images of the 'Holy Land'.

Local photographers in Palestine have been documented as practicing the medium since 1877 by Ottoman census, and Alexander Scholch mentions three local Greek Orthodox and one Armenian photographers working from Jerusalem in 1877. This Armenian may have possibly been Patriarch Yessayi Garabedian who started courses in photography from the church compound in the Old City of Jerusalem since

⁵⁴³ Issam Nassar, 'Familial Snapshots: Representing Palestine in the Work of the First Local Photographers', *History and Memory*, 18.2 (2006), p. 140.

⁵⁴⁴ Nassar, 'Familial Snapshots', p. 141.

the early 1960s. His student Garabed Krikorian opened the first studio in 1885. Khalil Ra'ad who we are told opened his first studio in the early 1890s in Jerusalem was of Arab descent. In Jaffa more followed suit such as Daoud Sabonji and Issa Sawabini. Nasser's article points us to the archive left behind of political and daily life as found in the early local photography whilst also allowing us to understand 'how local people viewed and "framed" themselves'.⁵⁴⁵ Whilst this thesis does not dwell on the identity politics of the poets and artists under discussion, it does have some weight in relation to the Palestinian case where much historiographical accounts of Palestinian photography have centred on excluding certain groups from the 'dominant' photography scene in its early development. Mentioning the role these communities played in the development of the artistic genre is more of a testament to the inclusion of these groups rather than an exclusion, and does not infer a reading of their works based on their identities.

To add to this discussion of photography in Palestine, Issam's article interestingly notes how most of the early photography was documentary in purpose. He however does try to balance out the scene he creates by including the image of one photograph which uses the medium as art. An image of a certain Mr Skafi from 1922 is shown, where Mr Skafi is present in the image in four different poses, in one pose Mr Skafi's head is on a plate before Mr Skafi himself whilst the other Mr Skafi's look on in surrealist fashion. The photographer is unknown, but we are inclined to draw a

⁵⁴⁵ Other writers have sought to document the role of photography in projecting a national identity. Tim Jon, *Israeli and Palestinian Postcards: Presentations of National Self* (Austin: University of Texas, 2004) traces Zionist postcards created in Germany to the construction of an Israeli identity whilst drawing upon individual creations of postcards by Palestinians. Although the research probes a methodological issue by comparing two cultural objects which are not the same, produced under different circumstances and also of different media (photography and paintings used in the postcards he addresses), the book is an interesting read in the way that larger corporations (in the Israeli case) and individual Palestinians use the medium of photography and painting for postcards to construct and frame the larger collective national identity.

fine art photography scene from this important moment, a moment which was to pave the way for fine art photography from Palestine.

There have been other studies however that locate and trace the development of fine art in Palestine such as Samia A. Halaby⁵⁴⁶. Adila Laïdi-Hanieh⁵⁴⁷ examines contemporary Palestinian landscape photography and concludes that post-1993 Palestinian photography of the occupied land is a way of expressing a dissonance with the dominant cultural paradigm. Beginning with an outline of how landscape photography of Palestine began with the French pioneers of the photographic medium, and subsequent Christian and Zionist travellers ‘documenting’ the Biblical sites of their imagination, negating the inclusion of a native populace, Laïdi-Hanieh goes on to show how early photography by Palestinians did not include the land and was more of a documentation of the people.

⁵⁴⁶ Samia A. Halaby, *Liberation Art of Palestinian Painting and Sculpture in the Second Half of the 20th Century* (New York: H.T.T.B Publications 2004).

⁵⁴⁷ Adila Laïdi-Hanieh, ‘Palestinian Landscape Photography: Dissonant Paradigm and Challenge to Visual Control’ in *Contemporary Practices: Visual Arts from the Middle East*, 5 (2009), pp. 118-23.

Appendix 3.2

Palestinian Art: A brief overview

It has been noted by writers of the history of art in Palestine that the earliest forms of easel painting began with the latter, declining years of the Ottoman Empire, despite there being scant crucial visual and documentary evidence for this.⁵⁴⁸ At the same time that photography was introduced to Palestine, artistic tools, techniques and perspectives from Europe were engaging with art practices of the Middle East.

Coinciding with modernity, and the need to express a self more advanced and less traditional, easel painting and photography appealed to urbanised populations whereby photographs were often used as *aide-memoire* in paintings⁵⁴⁹.

The earliest examples of easel painting in Palestine were of mainly religious iconography, inherited from the model of Byzantine icon painting, refined and elaborated during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries bringing the form into popular culture. They were bright images of saints with Arabic inscriptions on them – seen to be an indication that signalled the beginning of an Arab Orthodox break from Greek hegemony over the Church-, often with Ottoman details such as fabric patterns. These images were not only found in the homes of the Orthodox community in the Levant, but also spread to different parts of the Ottoman Empire and Orthodox world through pilgrims.

⁵⁴⁸ Gannit Ankori, 'The Shadow of the *Nakba*: Art before 1948', in *Palestinian Art* (London: Reaktion, 2006), p. 24. An earlier attempt to trace the history of Palestinian art sets it as beginning with the history of British colonisation in 1917. For more on this see Afif Bahnassi, 'Ismail Shammout wa Bidayat al-Fann al-Filistini', in *Ruwwad al-Fann al-Hadith fi al-Bilad al-'Arabiyya* (Beirut: Dar al-Raid al-'Arabi, 1985), p. 148.

⁵⁴⁹ One such painter is Khalil Halabi (1889-1964). Mubarak Sa'ed (18786-1961) also was said to have used photographs as *aides* in his artistic creations sometimes. For more on the exact usage of photographic material see Boullata, *Palestinian Art*, p. 60.

Russian iconographers were the most influential of foreign settlers in Jerusalem, the hub of what was to become the artistic centre until 1948. Their frescoes and icons are found in the Church of Mary Magdalene. To rival the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church, the Church authorities, from pressures from the Catholic communities in Palestine, sent religious painters to teach painting in the monasteries of Jerusalem. These icon painters were to have a tremendous impact on the visual expression that was to be nationalised during the dawn of the twentieth century. Most of the early painters were taught by the Church painters and painted according to iconic representational styles adopted by the various Churches.

It was only Mubarak Sa'id (1876-1961) of this early generation of painters who followed this early religious educational contact with a Church painter with a foreign art scholarship in Italy. As he was not a practicing painter before this, he was the first to have broken this trend since the Renaissance, and employed the naturalist painting techniques of Europe, using his imagination or real life.

Another significant figure in Palestinian art history is Daoud Zalatimo (1906 – 2001), who witnessed the changes in history from Ottoman Palestine, to Mandate Palestine and finally to the Partition Plan set by the UN and the subsequent procreation of the State of Israel. During his career as an artist during the Mandate years, he was of the few who were able to take advantage of the less than 5 per cent budget allocated to education⁵⁵⁰. He worked as an art teacher since nineteen and took advantage of the summer workshops that were set up by British art teachers who worked in the Mandate's Education Department⁵⁵¹. Receiving regular and high quality art supplies Zalatimo sought inspiration from the newly published nationalist

⁵⁵⁰ Boullata, *Palestinian Art*, p. 64.

⁵⁵¹ Boullata, *Palestinian Art*, p. 64.

poems of Ibrahim Tuqan (1905-1941), and ‘Abd al-Rahim Mahmud (1913-48) in order ‘to demonstrate to his students how visual expression could be as emphatic as written language’⁵⁵². The interaction between the visual arts and poetry thus took on a nationalist turn, and Zalatimo was one of the earliest of artists to engage in this dialogue. He used politically allegorical methods so as not to incite the anger of his British employers, nor offend the many religious factions of Palestinian society. This method was to prove fundamental to the building of a Palestinian nationalist iconography after the loss of Palestine in 1948, whereby he was succeeded by Ismail Shammout (1930-2006) who then became ‘the leading artist of his generation to infuse his paintings with allegorical images borrowed from verbal expression for the purpose of nurturing national memory and mobilizing his people to regain Palestine’⁵⁵³.

Zulfa al-Sa’di (1910-1988) was the first artist to have exhibited at the Palestine Pavilion of the First National Arab Fair in 1933 in Jerusalem. Applauded by both Palestinian national figures and visitors from other Arab countries, this was a significant event that put art into the public domain. Up until that point, there were no public art exhibitions. Art was exhibited in churches or at church fairs whereby the art was hung alongside embroidered works and other crafts. Her use of Arabic script in her paintings of historical and heroic figures not only was a strategy to assert the Arab character of her portraits, but was also a means of celebrating portraiture as a new type of Palestinian national icon. It was not only religious, as we saw with the Jerusalem iconographers, but the portraits took on a more secular, nationalist turn⁵⁵⁴.

⁵⁵² Boullata, *Palestinian Art*, p. 65.

⁵⁵³ Boullata, *Palestinian Art*, p. 67. For more on Shammout see Isma’il Shammout, *al-Fan al-Tashkili fi Filastin* (Kuwait: [n. pub.], 1989).

⁵⁵⁴ Boullata, *Palestinian Art*, p. 70.

Al-Sa'di also used Khalil Ra'd's famous photograph of al-Aqsa Mosque in her painting.

Unlike al-Sa'di who adapted and Arabised foreign methods, another artist, Jamal Badran (1909-1999) revived the traditional crafts of Islamic ornamentations and Quranic embellishments.⁵⁵⁵ This going back to traditional forms of expression was a form of cultural resistance against the tools and techniques that had come along with the British Mandate. Badran went on to do an apprenticeship at Cairo's School of Arts and Crafts, where he spent five years. Upon returning to Palestine, he found the upper middle classes of urbanised Palestine concerned about the gradual decline of traditional crafts, and supported, through collections, the traditional crafts including embroidery, family objects, Islamic art objects, pottery, rugs, paintings, jewellery and other items that testified to the cultural heritage of Palestine.

The British Mandate's policy was then to encourage local crafts, as a result of which, Badran was granted a scholarship to study in London at the Central School of Arts and Crafts. His brothers also followed in his footsteps, whereby Khairi and 'Abd-al-Razzaq also studied in Cairo specializing in calligraphy, ornamental textile weaving, stained-glass-making and woodcarving. Khairi also joined his brother in London and upon their return to Palestine opened a modern family studio whereby they translated what they thought to be representation of what they learn of the Arts and Crafts Movement in Britain, which was a reaction against Victorian artistic and cultural aesthetics, marked by industrialisation of production. Notably, Charles R. Ashbee who was a key figure in the Arts and Crafts Movement, was also to influence the development of crafts in Palestine on a personal level. Their vision was to reignite

⁵⁵⁵ Ankori, 'The Shadow of the *Nakba*, pp. 29-32.

traditional crafts with modern methods and techniques in order to create a new national Palestinian art.

In a brave attempt to revisit patriarchal historiographies of Palestinian art, Ankori has also noted the importance of revisiting Palestinian embroidery, not as ‘tribal’ or ‘primitive’, but as ‘fine art’⁵⁵⁶. Also contributing to Ankori’s transgression of elitist writings on Palestinian art, she reassesses the identitarian politics at work in Palestinian art historiography, which fails to locate the Armenian Pottery of Jerusalem movement within Palestinian art history, which was pioneered by David Ohannessian in 1919.⁵⁵⁷

Alongside this development of a modern Palestinian aesthetic was a flourishing, specifically Zionist, art movement, a nationalised ‘Hebrew’ style. Endorsed by Theodore Herzl and approved by the seventh Zionist Congress in Basel in 1905, the Bezalel School of Arts and Crafts was founded. This ‘Hebrew style’ was an art aesthetic that fused ‘Eastern and Western visual components’ with a political and ideological motivation that promoted the Zionist ideal of Jews settling in Palestine. It was at the Bezalel School that the six-pointed star was used profusely in the arts and crafts of the artists and artisans at Bezalel which coincided with the Zionist fusion of the nationalist and the religious.⁵⁵⁸

⁵⁵⁶ Ankori, ‘The Shadow of the *Nakba*’, pp. 33-4.

⁵⁵⁷ Ankori, ‘The Shadow of the *Nakba*’, pp. 33-6.

⁵⁵⁸ The stripping of such religious and nationalist graphic referents in Steve Sabella’s photography are significant. His works interrogate the assumptions of such logic, that a national and religious identity can be embodied in a graphic symbol, as well as strip his subjects iconically of any religious or national referent. Instead, he uses the literal word to clothe his subjects, interrogating the very assumptions and structures set up by such linguistic signifiers.

Appendix 4.0

The 'qafīyya' poem

إِنِّي ذَكَرْتُكَ، بِالزَّهْرَاءِ، مُشْتَاقًا،
 وَلِلنَّسِيمِ اغْتِلَالًا، فِي أَصَانِلِهِ،
 وَالرَّوْضُ، عَنْ مَائِهِ الْفَضِيِّ، مَبْتَسِمٌ،
 نَلْهُو بِمَا يَسْتَمِيلُ الْعَيْنَ مِنْ زَهْرٍ
 كَانَ أَعْيُنُهُ، إِذْ عَايَنْتِ أَرْقَى،
 وَرَدَّ تَالِقٌ، فِي ضَاخِي مَنَابِتِهِ،
 سَرَى يَنَافَحُهُ نِيلُوفَرٌ عَبَقٌ،
 كُلُّ يَهِيْجٍ لَنَا ذَكَرَى نَشْوَقِنَا
 لَا سَكَنَ اللَّهُ قَلْبًا عَقَّ ذَكَرَكُمْ
 يَوْمٌ، كَأَيَّامٍ لَدَاتِ لَنَا انْصَرَمَتْ،
 لَوْ شَاءَ حَمَلِي نَسِيمُ الصَّبْحِ حِينَ سَرَى
 لَوْ كَانَ وَفَى الْمُنَى، فِي جَمْعِنَا بِكُمْ،
 يَا عَلَقِي الْأَخْطَرَ، الْأَسْنَى، الْحَبِيبَ إِلَى
 كَانَ التَّجَارِي بِمَحْضِ الْوُدِّ، مَذْزَمَنَ،
 فَالآنَ، أَحْمَدُ مَا كُنَّا لِعَهْدِكُمْ،

وَالْأَفَقُ طَلَقَ وَمَرَأَى الْأَرْضَ قَدْ رَاقَا
 كَأَنَّهُ رَقَّ لِي، فَاعْتَلَّ إِشْفَاقَا
 كَمَا شَقَقْتَ، عَنِ اللَّبَاتِ، أَطَوَاقَا
 جَالِ النَّدَى فِيهِ، حَتَّى مَالِ أَعْنَاقَا
 بَكَتْ لِمَا بِي، فَجَالَ الدَّمْعُ رَقَرَا
 فَازْدَادَ مِنْهُ الضَّحَى، فِي الْعَيْنِ، إِشْرَاقَا
 وَسَنَانُ نَبَّةٍ مِنْهُ الصَّبْحُ أَحْدَاقَا
 إِلَيْكَ، لَمْ يَعْذُ عَنْهَا الصَّدْرُ أَنْ ضَاقَا
 فَلَمْ يَطِرْ، بِجَنَاحِ الشَّوْقِ، خَفَاقَا
 بَنَيْنَا لَهَا، حِينَ نَامَ الذَّهْرُ، سَرَاقَا
 وَافَاكُمْ بِفَتَى أَضْنَاهُ مَا لَاقَى
 لَكَ مِنْ أَكْرَمِ الْأَيَّامِ أَخْلَاقَا
 نَفْسِي، إِذَا مَا اقْتَنَى الْأَحْبَابُ أَعْلَاقَا
 مِيدَانِ أَنْسٍ، جَرِينَا فِيهِ أَطْلَاقَا
 سَلَوْنُمُ، وَبَقِينَا نَحْنُ عَشَاقَا!

I remember you in az-Zahra longing for you,
 and the horizon was bright and the aspect of the
 earth was clear.

The breeze was sick in its evening hours,
 As if it pitied me, so it was sick out of pity.

And the flower garden--from its silver water--was
 smiling
 as if you had opened collars—from the upper parts
 of the breast.

We divert ourselves with the flowers which attract
 the eye,
 dew running over them so that their necks droop,
 as if their eyes--when they see my sleeplessness--
 weep over what hurts me, so their glistening tears
 flow.

Roses flash (like lightening)--in their sunny
 Rosebeds--
 so increasing with their shining in the sun the
 brilliance.

The fragrant lotus blossoms pervade the night
 diffusing perfume,

slumbering when dawn roused their pupils.

All this stirs in us the memory of our passionate
 longing
 for you, by which my heart has not ceased being
 dejected.

May God never quiet a certain heart which the memory
 of you rends
 so it would not fly on the fluttering wings of
 longing.

If the breeze of the morning wanted to carry me—
 when it travels--
 it would bring you a young man emaciated by what
 he encountered.

A day like the days of joys that are elapsed for us,
 we spent the night beings thieves of it--when fate
 was sleeping;

if it fulfilled the desires--concerning our union
 with you
 then indeed it would be the noblest of days in
 creation.

O my precious one, most noble and magnificent,
 dear to
 my soul, if lovers can ever acquire precious
 possessions,

our mutual claim of pure love has for a long time
 been
 the playground of friendship on which we roamed
 freely;

And now--I praise how we kept your pact--
 you consoled yourself while we remained yearning.⁵⁵⁹

⁵⁵⁹ Ibn Zaydun, 'qafiyya', trans. by Sieglinde Lug in Sieglinde Lug, *Poetic Techniques*, pp. 119-121.